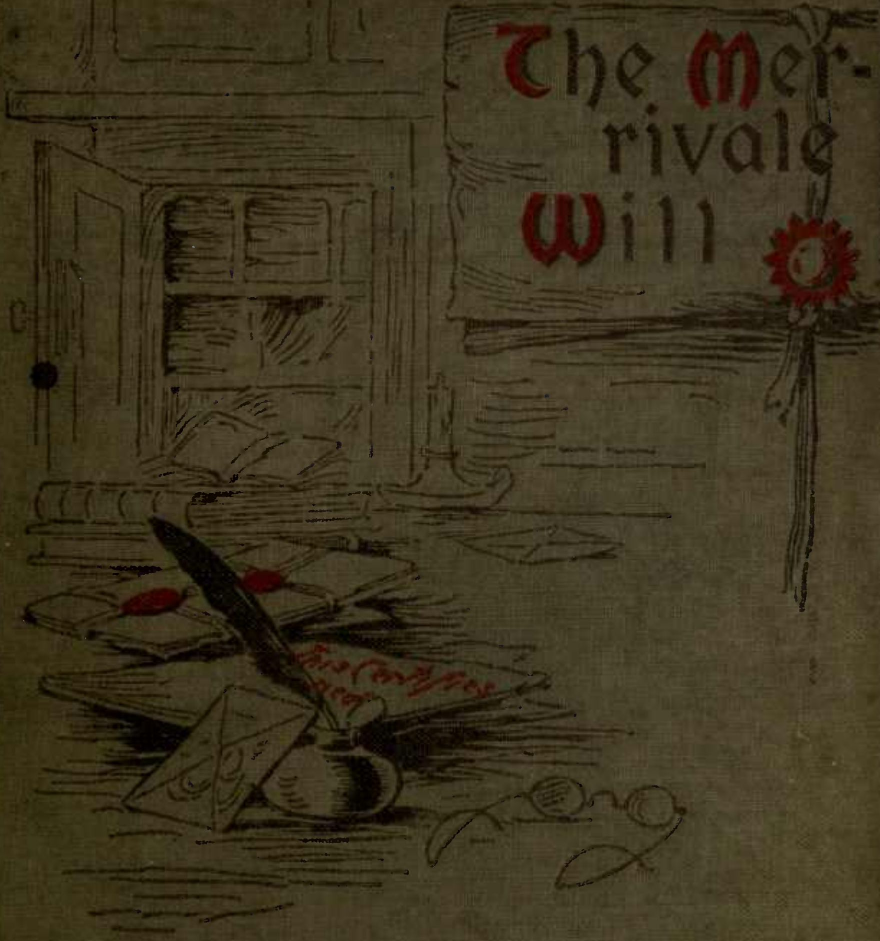
The Merrivale Will



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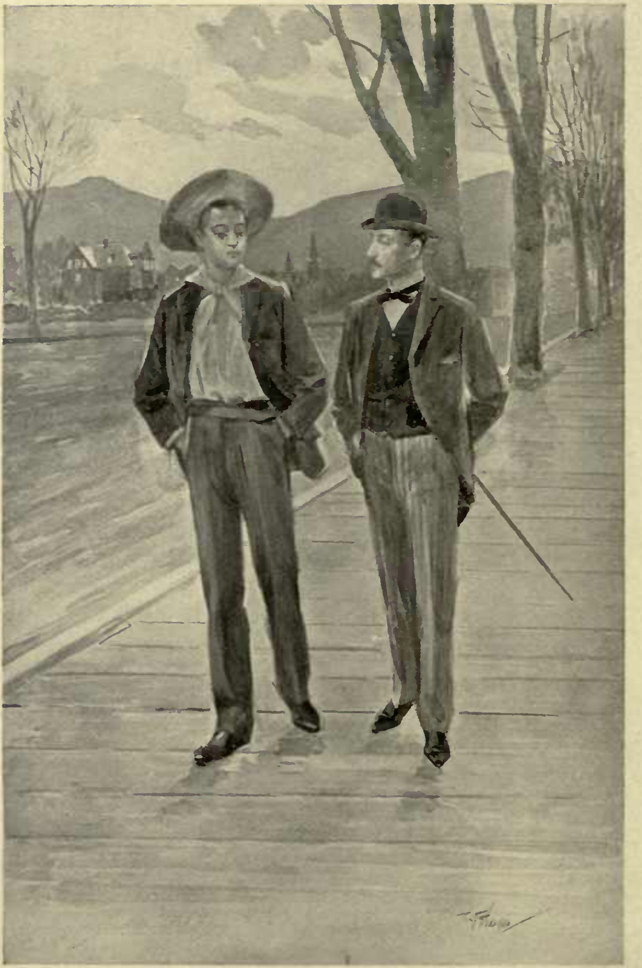

"'If you could prove relationship—'"

The Merrivale Will.

Page 37.

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THE

MERRIVALE WILL

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"*Old Bristol,*" "*The Family of the Black Forest,*"

"*In Colonial Days,*" etc.

* * *

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THE MERRIVALE WILL

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST ALARM

A COLD gray sky stretched monotonous and dull over bare brown fields and leafless woods as the train from Harriton came rattling up to the little station of Briarley. It was already nearly twilight of the short November day, and the still penetrating cold in the air threatened snow as surely as did the cloudy sky.

"Now really, it is so long since I have been out here that I am not quite sure whether I know my way," muttered an elderly gentleman who had just descended from the train.

He peered about him a moment and noticed that only two people besides himself had stopped at Briarley, one of whom was a tall and rather portly gentleman, and the other a lad of about eighteen. Both of them were evidently well acquainted with the place, and the old gentleman followed them as they walked briskly around the platform to the opposite side of the neat little station. There a handsome carriage was waiting, into which the gentleman sprang and was rapidly driven off. The lad glanced about him before following the direction that the carriage had taken; but it was curiosity rather than indecision that prompted his delay, for he was watching the old gentleman.

"I beg your pardon, sir ; are you looking for some one ?" he asked, as the latter approached him.

"I am trying to remember which is the shortest way to Merrivale farmhouse," said the old gentleman in quick, decided tones.

"I am just going there. It is my home," said the lad.

"Oh, ho ! so you are Mortimer Winstead. I should not have known you," remarked the old gentleman. "Well, I am Mr. Lindsay, and I have come out to see your mother ; so I will walk to Merrivale with you. Is it far ?"

"Oh, no, a very short distance," replied the lad. "I knew mother was expecting you and that is why I was watching you, Mr. Lindsay. I hope you did not think me rude," for the manner of his companion was so abrupt that Mortimer Winstead hardly knew what to think.

"Not a bit of it, not a bit of it," responded Mr. Lindsay. "You are coming home from school, I suppose."

"No," replied Mortimer, "I am coming from the office. I am in Palmer & Davenant's office. I am too old to be dependent on mother when she has the girls and John to support." He spoke with a tone of offended pride that Mr. Lindsay was quick to notice.

"Well, well, that is right. So you are earning something. So much the better. But there are such a lot of lazy fellows about now who can't earn their salt, how was I to know but you were one of that sort ? I have not seen you since you were ten or twelve years old."

The old gentleman spoke so testily that Mortimer felt inclined to laugh and replied: "Of course, sir, you could not tell ; and in fact mother wanted me to go on studying ; but Jack is the bright one, and he is the one who ought to go to college. I told mother that I wanted to go to work, as it was only right that the eldest should."

"The eldest? I thought the eldest was a girl," said Mr. Lindsay quickly.

"Oh, yes, Bertha is a year and a half older than I am; but she is not the one to work when I am a great strong fellow," said Mortimer, stretching up his tall figure and looking down with a good-humored smile upon his companion, who was small and wiry.

Mr. Lindsay only grunted in reply, and then exclaimed:

"Ah, I see my way now. We are coming to the turnpike and there is the farmhouse among those trees to the right. The station used to be over there," and he pointed to a spot a little distance farther down the railroad.

"Yes, but it was moved years ago," answered Mortimer. "I don't remember the exact date, but it was before Aunt Jessica died, and before we came to live at Merrivale."

Mr. Lindsay nodded and they pursued their way in silence till they came to a small gate opening on a bricked path that led up to the little porch at the front door of the farmhouse. Lights were already shining from the windows, sending a cheerful gleam out into the rapidly gathering dusk, and as Mortimer opened the door a merry hum of voices floated out and two girls came running to meet him.

The younger was a plump, healthy-looking little lass of ten, with bright brown eyes. The elder was at the awkward age of fifteen; her face was too thin and sallow to have any pretensions to prettiness, and her eyes, which might have been fine, had the strained, peering expression that often characterizes short-sighted people who have not learned their need of glasses. The mouth and chin were more indicative of decision than of beauty, and the hair, which was brushed plainly back and hung in two braids down her back, did nothing to soften or set off her features.

"These are my sisters, Jessica and Helen," said Mortimer. "Helen, run and tell mother that Mr. Lindsay has just come out from town."

The little girl ran away toward the back of the house, and the older one opened the door of the parlor. A ripple of music trilled out into the dimly lighted hall, followed by a few stately chords and then a succession of brilliant runs.

"Somebody is playing in there who has good mastery of the piano," said Mr. Lindsay to Mortimer, as he divested himself of his overcoat and hung it up.

"It is Bertha practising," replied Mortimer; but as he spoke the music sank into a sweet and plaintive melody.

"Wait, we will hear it through before we disturb her," said Mr. Lindsay, laying his hand on Mortimer's arm.

Now that he had taken off his hat, Mortimer could get a better look at him, and he saw a thin face with keen eyes and a prominent hooked nose. Short gray whiskers extended half-way down the cheeks, and the rest was clean-shaven. The iron-gray hair was carefully brushed so as to conceal as much as possible a suspicious thinness on the crown of the head, and everything, from the irreproachable black suit to the well kept finger nails, bespoke scrupulous attention to personal appearance.

Mortimer's meditations and Bertha's music were broken in upon by the appearance of Mrs. Winstead, a delicate little woman of scarcely more than forty years. Her smooth brown hair, pleasant smile, and kindly eyes, gave usually a placid expression to her face, although it was worn and thin; but to-night there was an anxious look in her eyes, and the smile flickered and disappeared as soon as the greeting with Mr. Lindsay was over.

"It is very kind of you to take this trouble, Mr. Lindsay," she said, leading the way into the parlor. "Where is your satchel? You will stay till to-morrow, surely."

"No, no, my dear madame, that is impossible. I must return by the nine o'clock train to Harriton ; but that will give plenty of time for all there is to say."

"Bertha, dear, run tell Jane that we are ready for tea at once," said Mrs. Winstead as the young girl rose from the piano and silently shook hands with the old gentleman.

"I am sorry that the music was interrupted," said Mr. Lindsay with a courteous tone that was a contrast to his manner of addressing Mortimer. "You are a very good musician, Miss Bertha." His keen eyes seemed to be noting every detail of the pretty girlish figure in its perfectly fitting dark blue dress.

Bertha Winstead was conceded to be both the beauty and the genius of the family, and now a delicate flush heightened the transparency of her clear complexion, her gray eyes were glowing with the enthusiasm that music always inspired in her, and her small, shapely head, with its coil of fair hair, was held a little more erect than usual. She bowed, and the flush deepened a little in her cheeks at the compliment ; then she left the room very composedly to take her mother's message.

Mortimer and Jessica had disappeared, and Mrs. Winstead as soon as they were alone, said in a trembling tone :

"Is it something very bad that you have to tell me? Is it some failure that will cut down our income?"

"No, my dear madame, there is no failure," replied Mr. Lindsay in his brisk way. "Don't distress yourself now ; we can talk over everything quietly after tea. That oldest boy of yours is a fine fellow, or I am much mistaken; and as for Miss Bertha, she has grown up as I imagined she would, to be a lovely creature ; but I did not foresee that she would be such an excellent musician."

"She has inherited her dear father's talent," replied

Mrs. Winstead, "and I have tried to have her well taught. As for Mortimer, he is no genius, dear boy; but he is very good and plodding, and reminds me of my poor father. But I hope he will have better success than his grandfather."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Lindsay. "But you must remember that your father was hampered by his brothers. Old Mr. Merrivale did really more than he ought to have done for his older sons and your father had to shift for himself."

"I know Aunt Jessica felt that, and I think that she wanted to make it up to me and my children," said Mrs. Winstead.

The lawyer coughed discreetly, and the announcement that tea was ready broke off the conversation.

In the dining room, Mr. Lindsay met Jack, the brother of whom Mortimer had spoken as the bright one. He was a fine, frank-faced boy of twelve and, although just now on his good behaviour, it was plainly to be seen that he could brim over with mischief and fun.

"Not a bad sort of chap," thought the little lawyer; "but he needs to be brought up by a man. He will be utterly spoiled if he is left to that gentle little mother of his, for he will have his own way in everything. But I doubt if his father would have been much better."

The daughter of Mortimer Merrivale was thought by her friends to have made a very good match when she married John Winstead. Her father had only a modest clerkship to depend upon for the support of his family; but Mr. Winstead's father had left a very respectable little property to his son. The young man was an only child and, as he was steady and quiet, all looked promising for the young couple. He had no remarkable talent for anything but music, and that sometimes led him into small extravagances, but as long as his wife's father lived all went well with them.

After the death of Mortimer Merrivale it became evident whence the prudence of the little household had been derived. John Winstead, in a bad hour for himself, fell in with speculators and began to try to increase his capital in ventures that were beyond both his means and his comprehension.

Losses soon followed, and there came a time when his wife had to look longingly at every penny before she spent it, and to think with dread of the first of each month, when bills were rendered with a suspicious promptness that clearly indicated the state of Mr. Winstead's credit. At last an engagement as organist of a church in Harriton at a thousand a year was offered to him, and affairs began to assume a brighter aspect. But the spirit of imprudence clung to him; having nothing but his health left to risk, he risked that by loitering in a damp church porch one chilly evening after playing for a wedding in the overheated organ loft. A heavy cold was followed by acute pneumonia, and in less than a fortnight Mrs. Winstead found herself a widow with five children, the eldest of whom was only twelve years old, dependent on her.

It was not surprising that Mr. Lindsay had no very high opinion of the ability of the late Mr. Winstead to train up a bright and high-spirited lad like his younger son.

During tea time Jack's studies were spoken of, and Mr. Lindsay inquired what progress he was making.

"He does well," said Mrs. Winstead with a smile; "but we hardly think that he does as well as he can."

"Mother helps me with Latin," put in Jack. "Not that she knows such a lot, for she has to hunt things up as she goes along," he added with a superior air; "but then it isn't such an awful grind when one has somebody to study with one."

"I am trying to get Jack far enough advanced to enter the Harriton Academy after Christmas. I want one of my boys to go through college, and I am helping as much as I can to keep up his ambition."

"Well, well, he has time enough," said Mr. Lindsay puckering his brows. "And are you Miss Bertha's music teacher, Mrs. Winstead?"

"Not at present," replied the little lady quietly. "I taught her until I found that she was well enough advanced to need a more thorough and experienced teacher, and she has been for two years taking lessons of Professor Lubeck in Harriton."

Mr. Lindsay cast a scrutinizing glance at Bertha, who sat dainty and composed, opposite to him. Beside her sat Jessica, whose careless attire and rather plain, good-humored face formed a strong contrast to the appearance of her beautiful sister. But Jessica's face evidently attracted Mr. Lindsay, for his eyes reverted to her and he made several attempts to draw her into conversation. Jessica answered sensibly and pleasantly, but it was plain that she considered her place to be in the background, for she quickly let the conversation slip over to Bertha, who maintained her share with the quiet self-possession of one who was undisputed leader.

As soon as tea was over, Mrs. Winstead led the way to the parlor, and the children disappeared to a little schoolroom that opened out of the dining room. Mrs. Winstead had apparently completely recovered her usual cheerful placidity as she seated herself beside a little work-table, and waited for Mr. Lindsay to open the subject which had been the cause of his visit. The lawyer was the one who hesitated; but after one or two preliminary coughs, he asked:

"Do you remember the terms of the will of your aunt, Miss Jessica Merrivale?"

"I do not remember all," replied Mrs. Winstead; "but I know that she left Merrivale and the rest of the property that she inherited from my grandfather to my father and his heirs. It was the greatest blessing to me, as I do not know what I could have done otherwise to support myself and the children."

"H'm, yes," said Mr. Lindsay, flicking an invisible speck off his coat sleeve. "I was afraid that you did not bear in mind the exact disposition of the property according to that will, and that is why I thought it better to come out and see you. Miss Merrivale, contrary to my advice let me add, left the property to her three brothers, share and share alike, or to their heirs."

"Oh, but that made no difference," exclaimed Mrs. Winstead. "I remember now that it was left as you say; but you explained to me that as Uncle Felix died unmarried soon after he went West, his brothers were his heirs; and then, as Uncle Ralph's wife and children all died before him, and he himself died a week before Aunt Jessica's death, my father was the only one who left any heir."

"That is what we supposed," said Mr. Lindsay; "but I have just learned that your uncle, Mr. Felix Merrivale, was not unmarried at the time of his death. He had been married some time before the accident occurred which caused his death, and a child was born about six months after that accident."

Mrs. Winstead sat looking at the lawyer in blank astonishment; then the meaning of what he said seemed suddenly to flash upon her. Her face suddenly flushed and as quickly grew very pale.

"A child of Uncle Felix!" she exclaimed. "Then that child had as much claim as I to Aunt Jessica's property; but is it living?" she added eagerly.

"That is what is claimed," replied Mr. Lindsay. "I have received letters from parties who claim that Felix Merrivale's lawful heir is living and ready to institute proceedings to recover his share of the property."

"And that share?" asked Mrs. Winstead in a trembling voice.

"Would be one half," replied Mr. Lindsay, examining minutely an imaginary break in the nail of his little finger, in order to avoid watching the misery in her face.

"Then I and my children are ruined," she cried impetuously. "Oh, how can God permit it? I have tried so hard to bring them up right. But what does any one know of this stranger? My father was good and honest and steady, while Uncle Felix was reckless and wild. Aunt Jessica has told me that the first land that was ever sold from the fine old Merrivale farm had to be sacrificed to pay debts for Uncle Felix; and then it went on, first Uncle Felix and then Uncle Ralph writing to my grandfather for money, until nothing was left but the farmhouse and the small income that belonged to Aunt Jessica. Oh, it is too hard, too hard!"

She sat with her hands tightly pressed together in her lap and her eyes looking mournfully straight before her, but really seeing nothing in the room, for she was gazing at the mental picture of wrecked hopes and plans: the safe and happy home and musical advantages for her beautiful, talented Bertha, and the college education for Jack, vanishing like a dream; all the pleasures and advantages that the older children had already enjoyed, snatched from the lips of bright-faced Helen, whose education was only beginning; Mortimer condemned to the endlessly dull and plodding routine of office work. A sudden sob recalled her to the actual scene before her, and she bit her lips to recover her self-control.

Mr. Lindsay was carefully, with finger and thumb, drawing a loose hair from the lashes of his left eye, and after he had coughed once or twice the right eye apparently required the same attention ; then he began with a cheerful briskness that was more of a relief to his own feelings than any encouragement to Mrs. Winstead:

"Come, my dear madame, we really must not take the most despondent view. Of course these claims must be examined into. Nothing can be done hurriedly or rashly. I very much regret that Miss Merrivale would not take my advice. I told her, 'Your older brothers have already made ducks and drakes of more than their share of the original property; the rest belongs, properly speaking, to Mr. Mortimer Merrivale.' But she had very strict ideas of her own, and she said that it would only make ill blood between brothers to discriminate, and as she supposed that Mr. Winstead was well off and as she judged from his letters that Mr. Ralph was not very prosperous financially and she knew that he was in ill health, of course it seemed to her better to let the original disposition of the property stand after the death of Mr. Felix Merrivale."

While he was speaking Mrs. Winstead had been rapidly collecting her thoughts, and the look of distress faded from her face. Now she said very gently:

"Pray think no more of my words, Mr. Lindsay. God has been very good to me thus far, and I can safely trust my own and my children's future to his care."

"Ahem," said the lawyer, as he shifted his position a little uneasily. "You are wise to take the matter with composure ; and I can assure you, Mrs. Winstead, that although the copies of papers forwarded to me look perfectly correct, I shall sift all the evidence most thoroughly before admitting this claim. In most cases I found Miss Merrivale singularly clear-headed and with a keen sense of justice ; but in this case I could not bring her to see that when two out of four heirs have squandered in their father's lifetime more than half the estate, they are not in justice entitled to a share in the remaining half. This child may be a worthless character and we know nothing about the mother. Even if the marriage is proved to be authentic, there must have been some reason for the concealment practised. There is much to be cleared up and we will fight every inch."

"God forbid that there should be anything wicked or dishonest about this claim," said Mrs. Winstead earnestly, her pale face growing flushed and eager.

"On the contrary, that is the very thing I hope to discover," replied Mr. Lindsay briskly.

Mrs. Winstead shook her head. "I am ashamed to have to say," she began in a low tone, "that it was my own thought at first, but it was a thought that sprang from faithlessness. God can provide for me and mine, and also for this new cousin. Do you know his name?"

"Felix Merrivale's child was a girl," replied Mr. Lindsay. "It is her son who is acting in the matter. He signs himself Felix Merrivale Brant."

"Will you let me see what he writes?" requested Mrs. Winstead.

"Certainly," replied the lawyer ; "but let me caution you not to be mislead by false sympathy. The young man may be completely mistaken, or he may be simply the tool of designing people who purposely deceive him. He writes in the style of a very young man."

While speaking, Mr. Lindsay was turning over papers in his pocketbook, and he took out a fat letter which he handed to Mrs. Winstead.

She opened it with trembling hands, but she soon was deeply interested in its contents. It was dated from Denver, Colorado, and stated that the writer was the son of Joanna and Alfred Brant; that Alfred Brant was pastor of a little mission church in Silverbush, a small mining camp, but his health had given way and as he could no longer bear the altitude and the dry climate of Colorado, they were forced to move. In Denver the son had found a little employment and was trying to earn enough to pay their way farther east, and he had accidently learned from a man who came from Harriton that the Merrivales owned a large property near that town. At this point the letter became rather confused. The writer evidently felt very sore under his own troubles and poverty, and he wrote very harshly of relations who were letting his mother starve while they had plenty.

"It is a pitiful story," said Mrs. Winstead.

"Yes, yes; but we have not sufficient guarantee that it is true," hastily interposed the lawyer. "There is a copy of a marriage certificate and also a copy of an old letter of Miss Merrivale's; but these must be proved to be correct."

Mrs. Winstead was now unfolding the enclosures and she read from the certificate the names of Felix Merrivale and Ruth Harris. The other paper was very curt. Apparently Felix Merrivale had written to his sister asking for more money, and had also made some reference to his intention of marrying. The answer said:

"Mr. James A. Lindsay, 16 Cedar Street, Harriton, attends to business for my father now. He is too feeble to be worried with your affairs. You would better write to Mr. Lindsay. As to the question of getting married, you will of course please yourself; but I shall think you a bigger fool than ever before, and positively wicked, if you hamper yourself with wife and family when you have never yet been able to support yourself."

Mrs. Winstead examined the dates and remarked: "This letter is dated only a few weeks before the death of Uncle Felix and the marriage certificate shows that he must have been married nearly a year before. I suppose that he was afraid to own it and threw out some hints to see how the idea would be received by his father and sister."

"He certainly got very little encouragement from that reply," said the lawyer grimly. "But this boy, Felix Brant, apparently knows nothing about the will made by Miss Merrivale, and we must proceed very cautiously. I see no Christianity in playing into the hands of rogues."

"It does not read to me like the letter of a rogue," said Mrs. Winstead thoughtfully, "and if true, they are worse off than I have been. How will you find out the truth?"

"My partner, Mr. Guy Atherton, a bright young fellow, has to go West to attend to some business for a client, and he can make inquiries," said Mr. Lindsay. "You may rest assured that I shall take every means possible to protect your interests and those of your children." He rose as he spoke and glanced at his watch. "I see that I must leave now as my train is due in fifteen minutes. If you should have any letters from these parties, pray send them on to me and take no notice of them yourself. However, I doubt if there will be any letter, as apparently they do not know of the death of Miss Jessica Merrivale."

Mrs. Winstead gave the promise he asked for, and as she accompanied him to the door they met Bertha and Mortimer.

"The next time I come I shall hope to have the pleasure of listening to your music without interruption," said Mr. Lindsay as he shook hands with Bertha. "Business is dry work but it must come first."

A few snowflakes were beginning to fall; but Mortimer had provided himself with a lantern and was equipped to walk to the station with their guest. As soon as the front door closed behind them Bertha said :

"A nice little old gentleman, though he does have eyes like gimlets. What did he want, mamma?"

"I cannot tell you to-night, dear ; I am very tired and my head aches. I think I will shut up the house now, and we will all go to bed as soon as Mortimer returns."

CHAPTER II

TELLING BERTHA

THE next morning a clear sky and bright frosty sunlight streaming in at the deep windows of the old-fashioned dining room, seemed to exhilarate the whole family at the farmhouse. Even Mrs. Winstead, in spite of her wakeful night, found that her anxieties grew less perplexing under the influence of the bright sunbeams and the merry chatter of the children.

In all her weary cogitations during the night she had held firmly to the determination to say nothing to the children about the tidings that had come with such a shock to herself. "It will be time enough to tell them when we know whether it is true," she argued ; but with the daylight came a new thought. She must be very careful, for possibly she was even now spending money that did not rightfully belong to her.

"I must at any rate tell Mortimer and Bertha," she decided. "They are old enough to understand and help me, and as for the younger ones, I must just deny them what we cannot now properly afford."

The decision brought a certain relief to her mind, for she really longed to talk with some one with whom she could speak more intimately and freely than with Mr. Lindsay.

Mortimer had to go to his work in town, but Bertha was moving about the dining room, helping the old servant, Jane, who had lived with Miss Merrivale for many years and after her death had stayed on with Mrs. Winstead.

The dainty freshness of the young girl and her quiet, composed manner had a soothing effect on her mother's tired nerves. She watched her for a moment and then said playfully:

"I want you upstairs in my room when you have finished your work here, my 'neat-handed Phyllis.'"

"I shall be ready in a moment, mamma," replied Bertha; "and after you have finished what you want me for, I thought I would go up to see Ethel Palmer."

"You were up there yesterday," said Mrs. Winstead, "and you go again to-morrow to take your music lesson."

"Yes; but Kate Willoughby was coming out last evening, and I told Ethel that I would run up this morning to have a little music," said Bertha.

Mrs. Winstead's brow contracted, but she only said gently: "I am afraid that there will not be time for music this morning, dear."

"Very well, mamma," replied Bertha placidly.

"Bertha, Kate Willoughby did not come last night," shouted Jack from the open doorway where he was buckling a strap around his school books. "Mortimer told me that Mr. Palmer came out in the train with him, and there was nobody with him."

"She may have taken an earlier train. Ethel did not say she was coming with her father," replied Bertha.

"All I know is that Mortimer said that Mr. Palmer asked him to watch for Miss Willoughby before the train left Harriton, and she did not come," said Jack, and he shouldered his books and went off whistling.

Mrs. Winstead went upstairs with a smooth brow. The Palmers had always been friends of the Merrivales and Mr. Palmer had bought the piece of land that was formerly the Merrivale apple orchard, and had built a fine house there.

His wife had died when Ethel and Gertrude were little children, and a few years later he had married again. Kate Willoughby was niece to the second Mrs. Palmer. She was a handsome, lively girl, with a fine voice, and their musical tastes formed a strong bond of sympathy between her and Bertha ; but Mrs. Winstead did not greatly like the companionship for Bertha.

The father of Kate and her brother Mark owned a handsome house in Harriton. They had lost their mother when very young, and in consequence their education had been rather desultory. At first they were put in charge of a nurse, then Mark was sent to school and Mr. Willoughby's sister took charge of his house and of Kate ; but when she married Mr. Palmer a quiet old lady was found to take her place. Old Mrs. Hughes was a capital housekeeper, but having no children of her own she was quite at a loss with lively, irrepressible Kate, and the girl had her own way just at the age when she most needed guidance. Mrs. Palmer often lamented over this to Mrs. Winstead, and was greatly pleased for Kate's sake that she could be thrown into company with the Winsteads ; but naturally, Mrs. Winstead was not so much pleased, and she was glad when it was possible, without making unpleasant feeling between the families, to keep Bertha away from Kate. She was therefore relieved to find that Kate had not arrived, and thus Bertha's visit would be given up without any prohibition on her part. She stopped in the schoolroom to see that Jessica and Helen were properly started at their morning tasks. Among all her duties she always found time to teach her children. Helen had not yet been sent to school, while Jessica was also under her mother's instruction this winter on account of her health and eyesight.

These matters being attended to, Mrs. Winstead went up to her room and took out the letter from Felix Brant which Mr. Lindsay had left with her. She had decided that the best plan would be to let Bertha read the letter herself. While she was still turning the pages the young girl came in with a roll of music in her hand.

"I am quite ready now, mamma," she said. "Is it a message that you want me to take?"

"No, dear; it is something very important that I learned from Mr. Lindsay last evening," replied her mother, drawing Bertha down on the lounge beside her. "I fear it will make a very great difference in the comfort of our lives; but we must remember that all comes from the hand of our God, and that our only safe course is to seek to find out his will and to follow that."

Bertha's pretty face began to wear a look of surprise and inquiry; but she quietly took the letter her mother held out to her, saying lightly:

"It cannot be anything very bad, mamma, when we are all together and happy."

As she read the letter her face changed, and when she had finished it and looked up again, an angry light glowed in her eyes and her lips were curved haughtily.

"I think it would have been better if Mr. Lindsay had burned this without troubling you with it," she exclaimed. "What right has this young man to find fault with us and with Aunt Jessica? People ought not to come begging in quite such an insolent manner."

"Hush, hush, my dear; you do not understand the matter," said Mrs. Winstead nervously. "If this is all true about the young man's mother, she has as good a right as I have to Aunt Jessica's property."

"Mamma, you are only speaking from pity for these people; they cannot have any claim on you," asserted

Bertha. "You never saw Uncle Felix, and they never saw Aunt Jessica."

"My dear, although Aunt Jessica knew nothing of this marriage, she did leave the property to be divided among her three brothers or their heirs," exclaimed Mrs. Winstead. "It all came to me because my uncles died before Aunt Jessica and left no children, as far as we knew, and I was my father's heir."

"It is all very unjust," persisted Bertha. "Are you to be thrown back into poverty and harassing work, when you are much less able to bear it than you were eight years ago when father died?"

"God will give me strength to bear his will," said Mrs. Winstead; "and you must remember, dear, that Mortimer is now able to earn, and you have a good education which has really put in your possession a means of making a living."

"Oh, yes, dear mamma, we shall both do all we can; but meanwhile you must not let yourself be imposed upon. What does Mr. Lindsay say?"

The angry cloud had passed from Bertha's brow, and she now stroked her mother's cheek affectionately as she spoke.

"Mr. Lindsay says nothing can be done until he makes inquiries," replied Mrs. Winstead; "but of course we must be very careful and economical. A division of the property would mean the sale of this house."

"Oh, mamma, that would be dreadful!" exclaimed Bertha. "Grandpapa lived here, and his father and grandfather before him. You remember Aunt Jessica spoke of it as your home after she was gone."

"Yes, dear," replied her mother quietly; "but Aunt Jessica never knew that your father had lost all his property. She thought that Uncle Ralph would prefer cash and I could have the farmhouse; but how could I pay taxes and living expenses if I have nothing but the house?"

"No, that is true," said Bertha thoughtfully. Then she suddenly added in a cheerful tone: "We can help you, dear little mother. I ought to earn a great deal more than Annie Struthers by giving music lessons, and I think I would better stop my lessons with Professor Lubeck and look out for pupils at once. He will help me, I dare say, as he always calls me his best pupil."

"I thought, dear, that it would be necessary to stop the expense of Professor Lubeck's lessons," replied Mrs. Winstead; "and I rather counted on your help with Helen and Jessica. About your taking pupils, it would depend so much upon where they lived and with whom you would be brought in contact. We cannot decide upon that hastily."

"Ah, well; don't worry any more about it to-day," said Bertha. "No wonder you had a headache last night. I positively hate those Brants."

"Don't say that, dear," expostulated her mother. "If they are really our cousins and in such straits, I should be thankful to help them. Remember Mr. Marshall's sermon last Sunday. I have thought a good deal about what he said on doing the work that comes to us. You know you even talked to me about giving music lessons last year, in order to have money to give away; and you were very much interested in the family of Mr. Clarke, the missionary in Kansas, for whom we made up a box. Surely we should not be less kindly in feeling to our own kin!"

"There is a great difference between working to help people who are grateful and being reduced to poverty by people who are so rude and unjust," replied Bertha, with a shade of stubborness in her tone.

Mrs. Winstead sighed as she folded and replaced the letter in her writing portfolio. She knew that with many sweet and amiable traits there lay an obstinate streak in Bertha's character that sometimes bewildered her, for it would crop out so amazingly, yet so elusively.

"You must think in whose service you have enrolled yourself, dear child, and strive to do His will whether it be easy or hard," she said gently. "Now we will talk no more about the matter, and, of course, you will mention it to no one at present."

Bertha promised very readily and left the room, while Mrs. Winstead went down to the schoolroom to hear lessons and to go over sums and translations with Helen and Jessica.

The work of teaching usually went smoothly, for Mrs. Winstead had been well taught herself, and knew how to arouse interest in her scholars. But to-day everything seemed difficult and her headache began to return. While she was going over a page of dictation that Helen had just written, the thought flashed into her mind that her pastor, Mr. Marshall, might be able to tell her whether the name of the Rev. Alfred Brant was in the list of home missionaries. The parsonage was only ten minutes' walk from the farmhouse, and the thought of a little fresh air and a few words with kind old Mr. Marshall and his sensible, brisk little wife cheered her wonderfully.

"Run and find Bertha," she said to Jessica; "she can correct Helen's dictation and go over your French with you. I think a walk will do my head good, and I shall have just time to do an errand at the parsonage before dinner. Tell Bertha to come at once."

Jessica went quickly enough but returned as speedily, saying:

"Jane saw Bertha go through the arbor gate with a music roll in her hand very soon after you came to our lessons. I suppose she has gone to see Ethel Palmer."

Mrs. Winstead never found fault with one of her children to the others; but she had to shut her lips tightly before she could reply :

"Very well, dear ; have your French ready for me as soon as I finish with Helen."

In her own heart she said indignantly, "Bertha knew I did not want her to go." Then it occurred to her that she had not distinctly forbidden it and she sighed and resumed the lessons.

CHAPTER III

MORTIMER FINDS IT TRUE

BERTHA returned just as the dinner bell rang, and in answer to her mother's gentle expostulation, she said promptly and amiably:

"I am very sorry that I went. You did not tell me that you wanted me, and Kate was there. She had missed her train last evening and came by the next."

"That was late for her to come out alone," remarked Mrs. Winstead.

"She was not alone; her brother came with her. Oh, mamma, he has a splendid tenor voice. I have here one of his songs that he says Kate never plays properly. I tried the accompaniment; but it is difficult to read at sight, and Kate told me to bring it home." Bertha opened the roll of music as she spoke, and began to hum the song.

"Mamma's head aches," said Helen, looking up gravely from her plate. "She wanted you to finish our lessons with us so that she could walk down to see Mrs. Marshall before dinner."

"Oh, I am so sorry, mamma!" exclaimed Bertha. "Can't you go this afternoon?"

"No," replied the mother. "I want to cut out Helen's new frock. I shall not give it to Miss Dawson to make."

"Then let me take the message to Mrs. Marshall," urged Bertha.

"No, that can wait. I would rather you helped me with Helen's frock," said Mrs. Winstead.

Bertha bit her lip, but with only a momentary hesitation she answered pleasantly:

"Very well; then may Jessica carry back this music of Mr. Willoughby's? They are going back to town this afternoon, and they wanted me to come up again to try the song."

"Oh, yes, Jessica can go; but I want you to stay," said Mrs. Winstead, turning to Jessica with a relieved expression.

Nothing more was said on this subject at that time, but later in the day, when Jessica had returned from her errand and was helping Helen to cut out paper dolls in the schoolroom, the little girl suddenly remarked:

"Did it ever strike you that Bertha is selfish, Jessica?"

"No, and I don't think it is fair of you to say that, Helen, when you know that she hates to sew, and at this very moment is upstairs helping mamma with your frock," said Jessica hotly.

"At least she likes very much to have her own way," persisted Helen, as she surveyed critically the features of a doll that Jessica had just drawn for her.

"She gave up very nicely, though she wanted to go up to Mr. Palmer's again for more music," said Jessica; "and I know she would have stayed at home and taken all our lessons this morning if mamma had asked her."

"Yes," conceded Helen, as she thoughtfully prodded her scissors through the body of a doll that had not been drawn well enough to pass muster; "she gives up very nicely when the niceness shows."

"Now, Helen, that is positively backbiting," exclaimed Jessica indignantly. "Bertha is really good and conscientious, and is more particular than ever since she became a church-member, and she is very kind and sweet. I should think that you would be ashamed to say such things of your own sister."

Helen dropped the scissors, and propping her chin on her hands, stared with big puzzled eyes into Jessica's flushed face.

"I can't make it out," she said at last, slowly; "there is something wrong. I don't believe Aunt Rachel ever thinks about giving up her own way; but she must do it, for she is always doing nice things for other people without being asked; and Bertha is always having to be told."

"Aunt Rachel, of course, knows better how to go about it. She is twice as old as Bertha," said Jessica shortly.

"I don't think it is only that," remarked Helen musingly. "It has something to do with what Mr. Marshall said last Sunday, I believe. You know he said that if we thought less about giving up our own will and more about the will of Christ, we should succeed better."

"I don't think that you are old enough to teach Bertha or to preach sermons to me," replied Jessica, who, with all her good temper, was very sensitive to any blame of Bertha and was stanchly devoted to her beautiful sister.

Seeing that Jessica was likely to become irritated, Helen let the subject drop. The Winstead children were not prone to squabbling and nagging, and Helen's next remark was merely an inquiry whether Aunt Rachel had written to Jessica about some wool for Christmas work.

Aunt Rachel was the children's *confidante* in all the little schemes and surprises that were to be kept hidden from their mother. Miss Rachel Clive was their father's aunt; and as she lived in a quiet boarding house in Harriton and was, as Helen had said, always ready to do things for other people, numerous were the commissions entrusted to her for birthdays and before Christmas time.

While the two younger ones were chattering in the schoolroom, Bertha was stitching away diligently in the room above, while Mrs. Winstead cut out and basted work. At last she said:

"Mamma, I told Ethel Palmer to-day that I did not think that I would take any more lessons of Mr. Lubeck after Christmas."

"I suppose that it must be so, dear," replied Mrs. Winstead absent-mindedly, as she pinned a pattern.

"I also asked Kate if she knew of any nice families in Harriton, where a music teacher for beginners was needed," continued Bertha.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed her mother, startled into giving full attention. "I hope you have not been taking those young girls into your confidence, when I particularly desired you not to mention this matter?"

"Not in the least, mamma," replied Bertha placidly. "I said nothing about your affairs, only that I would like to begin to earn a little money."

"We will think about it, dear," said her mother nervously. "I shrink very much from letting you go out into the world as a teacher must."

"Don't worry about that," exclaimed Bertha eagerly. "Just think what opportunities for improvement I shall have if I can go to town frequently. I missed so many concerts and matinees last year, because you did not think it best to spend so much in constant trips to town."

Mrs. Winstead remembered perfectly well that Bertha had been eager very often to go to Harriton with some of her young friends, or else had begged for permission to spend a few days with her Aunt Rachel or with some of her friends who lived in town, in order to hear more music. Mrs. Winstead, though very willing to please and gratify her, had felt that it broke up home life and also threw Bertha at times into the company of young people with whom she did not desire her to become intimate. She had felt thankful that she lived in the country and could more easily guard against these dangers; so it was not surprising that now she did not share her daughter's enthusiasm.

"Don't be hasty, Bertha," she said wearily, passing her hand over her forehead. "I must talk to Mortimer this evening and hear what he says before we make definite plans."

Bertha was too well pleased with the perspective that was opening before her imagination to press the subject. She stitched away busily, talking cheerfully on other topics, but was all the time mentally arranging her own plans with that placid determination which was characteristic of her.

Mortimer had never been considered at all brilliant; but he was possessed of quiet common sense, combined with a kindly nature, that made him really a valuable adviser to his mother. It was therefore a relief to her to look forward to laying the whole matter before him, and she tried to push aside all further thought until his return.

Mortimer had noticed that his mother seemed worried, but he had no idea of the importance of the communication that Mr. Lindsay had made to her the preceding evening, and when she called him to her room for a private talk after tea and put the matter before him, he was a good deal taken aback.

"It does not read like a made-up story, mother," he said, as he carefully read through Felix Brant's letter and handed it back to her; "and if that fellow is really in the plight he describes about his father and mother, I am awfully sorry for him. But we must be very careful not to get taken in. Of course it would make a tremendous difference to us if the property had to be cut in half; but we don't know that it will come to that; and even if it does, don't you worry. I shall get a rise soon at Palmer & Davenant's, and things will not be half as bad as they were when father died; for at the worst there will be something to start afresh upon, and then, you know, you had nothing."

Encouraged by his words Mrs. Winstead began to talk over plans, and the mother and son discussed the question until Mortimer suddenly exclaimed:

"If this fellow's father is a minister, as he says, I wonder if we could not find his name in some list of ministers or home missionaries."

"I had thought of that," replied Mrs. Winstead, "and I intended to go to the parsonage as soon as I had time, to ask Mr. Marshall."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Mortimer. "I'll put on my hat and overcoat and run over there now. I'll be bound that he can lend us a 'Year Book,' and if we can't find him in that we can get lists of ministers of other churches."

"It is worth trying," replied his mother, as Mortimer hurried off.

The letter gave no clue as to the church to which Mr. Brant belonged, but Mrs. Winstead in her eager and excited state, felt as though this test was to be a proof of the truth of all Felix Brant's assertions. She paced her room for a little while after Mortimer had gone, hardly knowing what she wished or feared; then suddenly her restless pacing to and fro ceased and she fell on her knees and prayed earnestly, not that this impending trouble might be averted, but that she might see the Lord's will in it all, and that she might be taught how best to do his will. She was still kneeling when the sound of the house door opening and closing and of rapid steps warned her that Mortimer had returned.

She rose quickly and met him at the door of the room with eager questioning eyes.

"Here it is, mother," he said, pulling a copy of the "Year Book" from his pocket and opening it at the name Colorado, he ran his finger down the list of names alphabetically arranged, and read: "'Brant, Alfred T., Silverbush.' That must be the man; so far the story looks true."

Mrs. Winstead took the book and looked at the name, and almost to her own surprise her heart seemed to grow lighter.

"I am glad that you went for this, Mortimer," she said. "I do not feel now as despondent as I have been ever since Mr. Lindsay first showed me that letter. I knew all the time that everything must be for the best, but now I begin really to feel it."

"That is right, little mother, keep up good heart," said the young man cheerily. He did not understand her, but he was glad to see her more cheerful and he added bravely: "It will not do any of us any harm to try our mettle a little. You must remember that now you haven't a pack of babies on your hands as you had eight years ago. I shall get ahead fast and Bertha will be a great help to you."

"Bertha has already told me that she will give up her own music lessons when the quarter is up with Professor Lubeck at Christmas; and she wants to get some pupils," said Mrs. Winstead in a doubtful tone.

"Well, if we have to move into Harriton that might be a good plan," remarked Mortimer. "I was thinking more of the help that she could give you with the little ones. Still, as there is no need to decide about that now, we can let it wait until we know exactly what must be done about the Brant claim. How does Bertha look at that matter?"

"She was very much annoyed at first," replied his mother. "But she seemed more cheerful to-day. The tone of the letter vexed her I think."

"No wonder," replied Mortimer, with a little shrug.

"I do not want either of you to feel vexation or any personal dislike to those who may be really our relations and who may also be very nice people," said his mother urgently. "I am sure that it will all come right if we are willing to wait to know what is the will of God and if we do not hastily endeavor to make things bend to our own feelings and wishes. How can we be sure that we can see far enough to wish for what is really the best for us?" She spoke very earnestly and her pale face flushed, for she rarely let her innermost feelings express themselves so plainly.

"Right again, little mother, as you always are," responded Mortimer heartily, and bending his tall figure he kissed her. Then drawing her hand protectingly through his arm he said, "Now come downstairs and think no more about it all to-night."

CHAPTER IV

THE LAWYER IN COLORADO

THE setting sun was dipping toward the line of mountain peaks that form the western horizon to the town of Colorado Springs. His rays still fell warm and bright through the leafless branches of the cottonwood trees with which the streets and avenues of the little town were lined. Two young men were walking along the wooden sidewalk in earnest conversation. The elder and shorter man was evidently a stranger. He bore unmistakable traces of having recently arrived from the East, while the other was a tall, powerful young fellow, whose honest brown face had the keen, alert aspect of one who had been accustomed to the rough, open-air life of Western pioneer camps.

They were approaching a little one-story frame house that stood near the outskirts of the town, where houses, trees, streets, and irrigating trenches all merged into the wide, level, sun-browned prairie stretching away as far as the eye could reach toward the distant eastern horizon.

"Well, Mr. Atherton, all I have got to say is, that my father and mother don't know the first syllable about that letter of mine. I wasn't going to bother them, when like as not it might all come to nothing. They did not like the man who first put it into my head that there might be anything gotten from relations of my mother's."

"How was it that the man you speak of did not give you more exact information?" asked Mr. Atherton.

"Oh, he was a bad lot, and I never asked him anything.

If he had thought that anybody cared two straws about any information he could give, he would have skinned them out of every cent that he could get, and then have lied, as like as not, in the information."

"That is a fine character!" exclaimed Mr. Atherton. "How did you come to pay any attention to what such a man said?"

"Only because he let drop something about Merrivales living near Harriton, and about their having a good big property there. Of course I pricked up my ears, because I knew that my mother was a Merrivale, and when things went so badly with my father, I got her talking about her parents and found out the address that she had in that letter from my grandfather's aunt. If it is all a hoax and there is no chance of anything being done to help my parents, I don't want them bothered about it," said the young man resolutely.

"You are very wise not to bother them until you know more," said Mr. Atherton cautiously. "There is a good deal to be done in such cases. You would have to prove that you were any kin to the Merrivales in the East, and that might be an expensive business."

"We can't go into any expensive business," replied the young man, with a short laugh.

"If you could prove relationship with the people that man talked about, what then?" asked Mr. Atherton. "Did he say that he thought you could get any money?"

"Who, Graves?" exclaimed the young man. "Not he. He never said a word to me about it. Of course, if these people were rich, they might think it a shame to leave a relation like my mother in poverty; but if they are mean skinflints, they may go. Mother has about all the worry now that she is able for; and as for father, he is not the sort of man to fight his own battles, though if you can show me any man who would fight harder and longer to save a poor fellow who is going to the devil, I just wish you would fetch him along; he would be worth knowing," wound up the young man with a defiant nod.

"Your father must have done a great deal of good in Silverbush," remarked Mr. Atherton, who was growing interested in his companion.

"If he has, it won't be from him that you will hear of it," retorted the son. "But here we are at the house; and before we go in I want you to promise me that you won't say a word to the old folks about all this that we have been talking about. They don't know that I met Graves in Denver. He had to leave Silverbush for his health." He nodded significantly as he spoke and faced his companion with a determined expression in his bright brown eyes and about his square jaw.

"Certainly; I consider all that you have told me as a matter entirely between ourselves," said Mr. Atherton, holding out his hand frankly. "But one word more, Mr. Brant. I want you to remember that where families have been separated, and the members have lost sight of each other for years, there may be complete ignorance without any intentional neglect or coldness; and the family at home naturally would want to be sure that all is right before trying to re-establish communications."

"Does that mean that you are afraid that I am trying to come a sharp game?" asked the young man with a short laugh. "But never mind, just come in and talk to my mother about her folks and you will soon see that I have told a straight story. As far as I am concerned I don't want anything from anybody except work, and I would rather get the work out here than to go East myself; but it is different with father; he must get away. I would rather earn the money to send them both East than to ask it of any cousins, even if I knew more about them than I do of these Merrivales at Harriton. But what is the use of talking? You will soon see for yourself that father cannot hold on here till I earn enough money for the journey. Now come in." He stopped abruptly and Mr. Atherton followed him through a little gate and up to a small side porch.

The sun was already disappearing behind Mount Rosa, and Pike's Peak loomed above the shoulders of the adjoining mountains like a grizzled giant, for snow rarely covers the Peak. Even in the depths of winter the fierce western winds rend and scatter the white mantle as soon as it falls, so that the gray rocky summit appears from the plain below to be only powdered or streaked with white. The background of mountains terminated to the south in the peculiar outline of Cheyenne, standing out dark against the glowing western sky.

Guy Atherton noted all this as he walked up the path to the little porch; but already the sudden chill that follows directly upon the disappearance of the sun began to be felt, and a shiver ran through him, though a few minutes before he had scarcely thought of the cold. As Felix opened the front door he gladly turned from all the chill outside grandeur and stepped into a comfortable sitting room cozy with the warmth of a good fire.

In an easy-chair beside the table, that was covered with books, sat a small, thin man. He was partly bald and his thin hair was gray. Indeed he looked so old and fragile that Mr. Atherton could hardly believe that he was the father of the stalwart young fellow beside him.

"This is Mr. Guy Atherton, father," said Felix. "I met him down at the post office. He only arrived yesterday from the East, and I guess maybe he knows some of the folks that you used to know there. He and I have been going about the town and I brought him up to see you and mother."

Mr. Brant had risen and held out a friendly hand to his visitor. Mr. Atherton noticed as he took it that, although it was brown and roughened, it shook perceptibly and the mild blue eyes had a weary look about the eyelids.

"I am glad to see you," said Mr. Brant; "but I doubt if we shall find that many of my old acquaintances in the East are known to you, as it is more than twenty years since I came westward."

"That looks like a longer time out here than in the neighborhood of Harriton," replied Mr. Atherton.

"That is true," said Mr. Brant. "I do not recall that I ever visited Harriton; but I was at college not far from there, and I heard of the town frequently; yet at that time this town was not even in existence."

His voice was so weak and tremulous that Guy Atherton hastened to take the chair that Felix offered him, as he could not bear to keep the old gentleman standing any longer. As Mr. Brant dropped into his chair again the light from the window shone more fully on his face and Guy noticed that, although the beard and mustache which covered his mouth and chin were nearly white, his face was more worn by illness than by age.

There was something in his expression, in the shape of his head and forehead, and in the tone of his voice, that made Guy Atherton judge him to be a scholar even before his eye fell on the Greek Testament and the Hebrew Bible that lay open on the table.

"We are interrupting your studies," he said, pointing to the books. "I hardly expected to find any one in this busy, pushing State who would find time to keep up the dead languages."

"I see that you share the popular idea that the West is the land of spades and picks and flannel shirts," replied Mr. Brant smiling. "It is true that the work necessary for the opening up of new country is not conducive to the ease and repose that form the most favorable atmosphere for the pursuit of literary labors; but much can be done when the taste lies in that direction. In this town you will find that people are not given up to the one aim of money getting."

"I have been told that Colorado Springs is rather an exception to other Colorado towns, since it has never been, as many others have been, a rough mining camp that gradually emerged from lawlessness into respectability."

"No, this place has always been rather a resort for invalids and for quiet people who wished to enjoy the wonderful climate and scenery," replied Mr. Brant.

"Have you been here long?" asked Guy.

"Oh, no; my station was at Silverbush, a mining camp; though I think that in a few years possibly I should find that a large and well-governed town, if my health were such that I could return thither," said Mr. Brant.

Guy wished that he could ask what had taken him to such a place; but Mr. Brant had given no encouragement for any personal questions, so he had to content himself with the remark that a quarter of a century had made wonderful changes in the Western States. "But," he added, "I should think that you would like to see the East again after such a long absence."

"I do find a feeling coming over me at times," said Mr. Brant slowly. "It was just before the war broke out that I came to St. Louis, and since then I have never been across the Mississippi River; but latterly, I think something of nostalgia has attacked me." He smiled faintly as he spoke, but any reply from Guy was interrupted by a voice behind him which exclaimed in rather shrill and very decided tones :

"Neuralgia ! Well now, father, that is just too bad. I know what neuralgia is, but I did think that you didn't have any turns of that, at least, when goodness knows you are weak enough without any more to pull you down."

"Mother," interposed Felix, "this is a gentleman from the East, Mr. Atherton. He knows a place you have heard of. He comes from Harriton."

"You don't say so ! Well now, that is queer," replied Mrs. Brant. "I'm glad to see you. I would just like to hear something about that place, for I never heard anything more than the name, though I have been told that my father's folks lived there."

She was a short, stout, and bustling little woman, with keen gray eyes and rather a sharp nose ; but there was such a kind, frank greeting in the way that she held out her hand, that Guy felt ashamed of a private opinion that he had been nursing, to the effect that she was the schemer of the family, who for reasons of her own had urged her son to make the claim that she did not care to make in person.

"I shall be very glad to talk to you about Harriton," he said ; "for I confess that when I arrived here last night I had a little fit of homesickness come over me. The only man I know happened to be out of town, and if it had not been for your son I should have spent a pretty dull day."

"You won't be long in pickin' up friends," replied Mrs. Brant heartily. "I knew everybody in Silverbush before we had been there a week, and we have picked up friends straight along both in Denver and here."

Guy was not in the least inclined to doubt her assertion.

She seemed to have such superabundance of energy that he caught himself inwardly calculating whether she could not in less than three weeks know all Harriton. But he soon found that he must give all his attention to her, for she began to question about Harriton and the people whom he knew there, till at length he asked :

"Have you friends living in Harriton ?"

"No ; but my father came from there, or near there. He died before I was born, but I have heard from my mother that his family lived there," she replied.

"Was your mother also from Harriton?" asked Mr. Atherton, who felt none of the delicacy about questioning her that he felt with her husband.

"No, indeed, she was an orphan, and she lived with her uncle's family in Iowa Territory, as it was then ; but I guess my uncle never stayed long enough in one place to succeed very well," said Mrs. Brant.

"How odd it seems to think of the State of Iowa as a Territory," said the young man smiling.

"I suppose so, to you," remarked Mrs. Brant, "and in fact I don't remember it as anything but a State, for I was only a child of about six when Iowa was admitted ; but I remember very well all the rough times there were in Kansas, about fifty-four, when they were fighting whether it should be a free or a slave State. My mother had died before then, and my uncle, who was a great anti-slavery man, moved into the Kansas-Nebraska Territory when the fight was at the hottest and everybody's blood was up. People talk of roughing it in the West now, but it is nothing to the days when I was a girl."

"Then I suppose your parents were married in Iowa," said Mr. Atherton, who found himself approaching the subject on which he desired information.

"Yes, but I don't exactly know where; the lines my mother had got torn or worn and the address is not there, though the date is plain enough. You see my father was killed by a frisky, wild young horse that he was trying to break in; and as that happened less than a year after their marriage, my mother had enough trouble and sorrow to wear upon her, and she did not live many years. I was only five years old when she died, and her uncle and aunt who had no children of their own and had always done for her, went on taking care of me."

"Are they living now?" asked Guy.

"Oh no; they died just about the time that we were married," she said, turning to her husband. "Don't you remember how uncle said that it was the one anxiety off of his mind when he had been permitted by the Lord to live to see me in the keeping of a good, God-fearing man. You see my father's folks never took any notice of him nor of my mother or me. I guess they did not care much about him," she added, nodding her head sagely to Guy.

"My dear Joanna, doubtless Mr. Atherton is ready for a cup of tea or coffee; and it must be close upon our supper hour," interposed her husband mildly.

"That's so," exclaimed his wife; "and here I am forgetting your neuralgia too."

"You may set your mind at rest on that score," replied her husband with a slow, amused smile. "I am suffering from nothing worse than a desire to see again my childish haunts. Nostalgia is a mental affection."

"It is Greek, mother," put in Felix laughing.

"Then I wish you would talk good plain English," exclaimed Mrs. Brant indignantly. "I won't spend any sympathy on Greek," and she bustled off to the kitchen.

As soon as she was gone the conversation turned to the books lying on the table. Mr. Brant was in his element, for although he had found plenty of clever, keen thinkers among the Silverbush miners, it was long since he had met with a well-trained and educated mind such as Guy Atherton possessed ; and the young man, fresh from the society of scholarly men, and not long enough out of college to have grown rusty in his classics, was amazed to discover what an amount of scholarship and of carefully balanced thought was stored up in the mind of his host.

A very appetizing smell of cooking began to penetrate the room, and soon Mrs. Brant reappeared to invite them to the supper table. In the general conversation that followed, Guy discovered that Mr. Brant used to know one of the professors at the college at which he himself had been graduated. Beyond this he made no fresh discoveries, as Mrs. Brant's lively garrulity was somewhat checked by her attention to the appetites of the party, and he did not care again to bring in personal matters in the presence of Mr. Brant, whose gentlemanly reserve might be offended by any effort on the part of Mr. Atherton to recall his wife to that subject. Felix had evidently not inherited his father's studious tastes, though apparently he knew enough to prove that he was the son of a well-educated man. He did not have much to say, but there cropped out in various little ways a genuine thoughtfulness for his parents' comfort, and a thoroughly honest affection for them that pleased Guy better than any amount of outward polish and veneer.

As it was evident that Mr. Brant was very easily fatigued, and as Guy felt sure that he had talked quite enough, he left early; but not before he had received a hearty invitation to come again. Felix also had made an appointment to take him out to Austin's Bluffs and up the Cheyenne toll road.

As soon as he got back to his room at the hotel, Guy sat down to write to Mr. Lindsay, as he felt really anxious to convey to him the very good impression that had been made upon himself by the Brant family. But after beginning his letter he pushed aside the paper and decided to write nothing until the following day, when he hoped to meet his friend George Curtis.

"It may be that I am really foolish to have taken such a liking to them, or at least it may look so to Mr. Lindsay, and I will wait till I can add Curtis' opinion of them to my own impression," he muttered. "The old gentleman is the only one who seems disinclined to say anything about his family; but if he knows Professor Rawson, I could easily find out about him. However it is not his genealogy that I am in search of. I don't believe that there is any chance of getting anything very satisfactory in a legal point of view for Mrs. Brant's claim; but of course I must find out all there is to be said in case it should be pressed," and with this determination he put away his writing materials and betook himself to bed.

The next day Guy found his friend Curtis who had come in from his ranch, and from him he learned more about the Brants. They were evidently much liked and highly esteemed by those who knew them; but Curtis remarked that they were very poor.

"The son does any work that he can get hold of; but he cannot go off on a ranch and leave them until he has some idea where to settle them. Mr. Brant cannot stand this climate any longer; it is affecting his nerves and heart, the doctor says; but I don't see how they are to get East, nor what they are to live on if they do get there," he said.

"How did a man like Mr. Brant come to be out here at all?" asked Guy. "He seems to be a remarkably well-educated man, and he looks as though he had always been a student. I cannot imagine him as coming West in search of gold or from a mere mania for adventure."

"I don't know," replied Curtis. "I never heard anything about his family; but I believe he settled in Kansas City about twenty years ago, and then some weakness of the lungs sent him up here after the doctors began to find out that Colorado was a good place to get rid of lung troubles. He has been here for eight or nine years, engaged in home missionary work in different mining camps. But any threatened lung trouble has been cured long ago, and now the altitude is just sending his nervous system to the dogs."

"I noticed that he was very shaky, and that occasionally he seemed to have a little difficulty in holding the thread of his discourse," remarked Guy; "but I thought that was due to his age."

"Age? Nonsense!" exclaimed Curtis. "The man is not much over fifty."

"You amaze me," said Guy. "He looks fifteen years older than Professor Rawson; and he is fifty, I know.

"Ah, well, you cannot always judge of a man's age from his looks. I imagine that Mr. Brant always looked older than his years, even when he was a young man; but now I have not the least doubt that getting to a more suitable climate would make an immense difference in his strength," replied Curtis; "and if I had the money, I would gladly pay his way East. But it is no use to speak of that; for first of all, I have only just enough to scratch along upon myself; and second, I believe that it would seriously offend both him and his son if I were to make such an offer."

There was evidently little chance of getting any more information about Felix Merrivale; and as Guy Atherton had other business to attend to, he did not care to spend any more time in Colorado Springs than he was obliged to. Taking leave of his friend, he sauntered out Nevada Avenue toward the house where the Brants were living. He intended to suggest to Felix that they should drive out to Austin's Bluffs together; but when he came opposite the little gate he saw only Mrs. Brant sitting on the porch. She had some sewing in her lap, but she had evidently recognized him farther down the street, for she nodded pleasantly and asked him to come in and rest. The sun was shining brightly, and the warmth reminded Guy of June.

"I can hardly believe that we are in December," he said, as he glanced at the thermometer hanging against a post of the porch. "It is actually at seventy."

Mrs. Brant laughed as she pointed to a couple of charred logs lying on the ground beside the porch.

"I had to haul those out of the stove," she explained. "My husband is too weak to stand any extra heat, and even the little spark of fire that I had smouldering in the stove made him feel smothered. I can't ask you in, for I have just got him to lie down in the sitting room to try to take a nap. It is really nicer sitting outside, I think."

Guy hastened to assure her that he much preferred to sit where he could watch the ever-changing lights on the grand mountain range.

"Yes, it is a real pretty sight," assented Mrs. Brant, "and I don't think I could stand Kansas after this. It used to seem the flattest, dreariest place to me out on those big prairies, even before I had been among the mountains, and now of course it would be worse."

"Are you thinking of going back to Kansas?" asked Guy.

"I can't tell," replied Mrs. Brant, shaking her head sadly. "If we had any one to go to, we might try it; but

I don't see where we could go. I don't know of any relations since my uncle and aunt died; and Mr. Brant don't ever say that he has anybody who would care to see him in the East. It seems as though the young men are not wanted back your way when they have once come out West. At least nobody ever seemed to care about my father; and I know that nobody writes or makes any inquiries about my husband."

"Maybe both of them forgot to write to their friends," suggested Guy. "When your father came West, communication was much harder, and young men stirring about to try to make a living in a new region have not much time or thought to answer letters."

"Maybe so, maybe so," replied Mrs. Brant. "At any rate, Mr. Brant only says that his parents are both dead, and he has no near kin, and he don't know where to write to anybody who is any kin at all to him; and as for me I only know that my father had a sister called Miss Jessica Merrivale, for a letter of hers was among my mother's things. Felix once wanted me to write to see if she was still living, but the letter was not pleasant enough to make me care to try."

Guy made no reply. He was wondering whether Mrs. Winstead would feel the same interest in the Brants that he did if she could meet them, or whether the thought of her children would make her look upon them merely as interlopers and people to be avoided.

"The fact is," continued Mrs. Brant, "as long as my husband was well we didn't want anything. Of course we have had pretty rough times; but from the day we were married till now I never have had anything worth complaining of; but I'm free to confess that now it is a pretty hard trial of faith to see him as he is and not to be able to do a thing but watch him grow worse." A big tear rolled suddenly down her sunburned cheek and dropped on her work. She raised her hand and dashed away almost fiercely the one that was gathering on the other cheek and looking straight at Guy exclaimed defiantly :

"You need not think that I'm only considering myself. I have not worked hand in hand with a man like him all these twenty years without knowing the good that he has done; and there is one thing that I will say: it is a good servant that the Almighty will lose out of this world if it has got to be that Alfred Brant is taken out of it in his prime, as I may say."

With all the queer abruptness of her manner and speech there was such real and unconscious pathos in her eyes that Guy's heart was touched.

"You must not look on the dark side," he said. "Your son tells me that he is sure of work, and his whole thought seems to be to care for you and his father."

"He's a good boy, Felix is," said Mrs. Brant emphatically, with motherly pride. "But there! a man's will can't do everything. My husband always says that we must be ready to seek out the Lord's will, and to do that, or nothing can go well with us; but I believe I'm afraid to do that, for fear it should run crosswise to my own."

She sighed wearily, but at that moment the gate clicked and Felix appeared.

"I was down at the hotel looking for you," he said. "It is late to walk any distance."

"I came up to suggest the same thing to you," replied Guy, "and I was going to get a horse and buggy at the livery stable if you will go with me."

Felix readily agreed to this plan, but Mrs. Brant looked up with her usual sharp, practical glance, and exclaimed:

"If you are going to drive out to Austin's Bluffs, you must stop first and get your overcoat."

"I hardly think that I need an overcoat with the thermometer at seventy," remarked Guy laughing.

"That just shows that you are a tenderfoot and need somebody to look after you," replied Mrs. Brant, as her son went softly into the house. "This country is like nothing so much as our own hearts. They are all warm and comfortable as long as the grace of God shines upon us; but as soon as a cloud or a mountain of trouble comes in the way, our hearts are cold and frozen in the shadow. Now take my word for it that you will need your overcoat before you get back. And see here, don't you go off with any mistake in your mind. If the Lord sees fit to let me have my will, all right; but if he does not, my will has got to straighten with his, anyway. There comes Felix back again, and you had better be off."

She had been vexed with herself for betraying her weakness to this young man, but this bit of practical advice and spiritual wisdom helped to restore her mental equilibrium; and gathering up her work she prepared to go into the house, while the two young men went to the livery stable.

"The fact is," she remarked to her husband, when she was telling him later in the afternoon of Guy's call, "I ought to be ashamed of myself, letting go my faith that way right in the sight of a young man who for all I know has not got enough faith himself to catch hold of, let alone letting go of it again; and then to think of all the mercies that I've had all these years; and here we are with a good roof and all furnishings right at our hand, just because the Nolans needed somebody to look after this house till they get it rented or sold. Well, well, the Almighty does need to have a heap of patience with me."

CHAPTER V

TO ASK STRANGERS HERE

MR. LINDSAY, sitting at his desk in the little office on the third floor at 16 Cedar Street, was busy opening the morning mail that the postman had just left for him. One among the pile of letters was directed in the handwriting of his partner, Mr. Guy Atherton, and it appeared to cause him a great deal of thought. At the end of the first page he gave a satisfied nod; at the end of the second page he looked annoyed; and at the end of the whole he laid it down with a very unusual expression of uncertainty upon his face. He puckered his brows and pondered for a minute, and then he took up the sheet and read it all over again. When at last he laid it aside he glanced at the window. Snow was whirling down outside in fine dry flakes, and already the window sill and the roofs of the opposite houses, were well piled with the wintry covering. He got up and looked down into the street. The prospect was not any better; however, he seemed to have made up his mind. Returning to his desk he rapidly ran through the remaining letters and then examined a railroad time-table, and consulted his watch.

"John," he called to the office boy, who was visible through the open doorway of a small adjoining room, "I have to go out. If any one calls, say that I shall be in at twelve o'clock."

Then he tucked his partner's letter away in an inside pocket, and muffling himself up to face the storm, he descended the long flights of stairs and walked rapidly away through snow and wind in the direction of the railway station, where he bought a ticket for Briarley and settled himself comfortably in the car.

When he arrived at the door of the farmhouse his quick, decided ring brought Jane to the door in a hurry. She recognized the lawyer, who used to come more frequently in former days; and as his appearance then had generally been the herald or the result of some worry about the "boys," she went with no very cheerful countenance to call Mrs. Winstead.

That lady, however, put aside her books quietly and told Jessica and Helen exactly how to continue their lessons before she left the schoolroom, and when she entered the parlor and greeted Mr. Lindsay there was no excitement or anxiety in her manner or voice.

"I have just received a letter from Mr. Atherton," he began in short, dry tones; "and I am satisfied from what he tells me, that there can be no claim advanced that would stand in a court of law. There are no witnesses forthcoming to the marriage of Mr. Felix Merrivale to Miss Ruth Harris, and the place where such a marriage could have taken place is uncertain owing to the original certificate being torn and the name of the place in consequence illegible. Mrs. Brant, who claims to be Mr. Felix Merrivale's daughter, has apparently no relatives living, and probably no friends who could prove that she was really the child of Mr. Felix Merrivale, even if his marriage was incontestably proved. With these two links in the chain of evidence lacking, I think that you may rest easy concerning any claim made by these people."

"Does Mr. Atherton say anything about the people themselves?" asked Mrs. Winstead. "I have learned through our pastor, Mr. Marshall, that there is in Colorado a Mr. Alfred T. Brant, who is highly esteemed as an accomplished scholar and also a very zealous missionary.''

''Ah, you have heard that, have you?'' said Mr. Lindsay abruptly. ''Then I can only say that Mr. Atherton's account corresponds with what you have heard, and he reports the condition of the family much as the son described it.''

As he spoke he laid before her the letter and turned his attention to the gradual warming of his feet.

Mrs. Winstead took the letter and read it through carefully. Mr. Atherton, after explaining the impossibility of any legally satisfactory proof of the relationship, went on to show that the integrity of Mr. Brant, and the simple and straightforward frankness of Mrs. Brant, gave every reason to believe that the story was correct, and he wrote quite warmly about the difficulties in which they found themselves. When she had finished, Mrs. Winstead looked up at Mr. Lindsay with an expression of distress.

''This is very, very sad,'' she said, ''and really they must be our cousins. Mr. Atherton is convinced that there is no deception practised.''

Mr. Lindsay bowed gravely and said nothing.

''What do you think about it?'' asked Mrs. Winstead urgently.

''My dear madame, I have not seen these people, and therefore my opinion is of no account. Legally you are entirely free to act as though you had never heard of them, and apart from the legal question, I have only to take your instructions,'' replied Mr. Lindsay.

''But this is not only a legal question,'' said Mrs. Winstead, her cheeks flushing but her voice clear and steady. ''If they are really our cousins they must have their share just as Aunt Jessica intended. I will be no party to any attempt to cheat them, for it would be only cheating if I were to keep what I am sure that I have no right to, even though they cannot force me by law to give up their share to them."

Mr. Lindsay smiled a little cynically, but he only said: "If you are thinking of making them a present of half of your children's property, I must remind you that you have no right to do that."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Winstead confused. "Surely I am the only heir to Aunt Jessica's property. It was left to me, not to my children."

"You certainly inherit as your father's heir," replied Mr. Lindsay; "but Miss Jessica was particular about having a marriage settlement drawn up before your marriage. Your father, having no money to leave or give to you, had paid no attention to that matter, and it was Miss Merrivale who came to me and gave me instructions to draw up that document by which any property that might come to you should be held in trust for your children, you receiving a life interest."

"Then nothing could have been done, even if Mrs. Brant had all the necessary proofs," said Mrs. Winstead.

"Oh, yes, for in that case it would be proved to your trustees that the property ought to have been divided between yourself and Mrs. Brant at your aunt's death, and of course the division would have to be made and the interest for all those years on Mrs. Brant's share, would have to be refunded."

"Oh, that would be very difficult to do," said Mrs. Winstead in dismay.

"Yes," replied Mr. Lindsay; "but that is all settled by the discovery that no good claim can be made against you."

"I cannot let it rest like that," murmured Mrs. Winstead thoughtfully. "Something must be done for them if they are really our cousins." Then she suddenly looked up with a brightening face and asked, "Could not the children join with me in requesting that a sum should be given to Mrs. Brant? I imagine that a moderate sum would look like riches to her, and she has only one son, and he is old enough to earn for himself, so that really she does not need as much to make her comfortable as I and my children do."

"None of your children are yet of age, unless the oldest perhaps," said Mr. Lindsay inquiringly.

"No, Bertha is not twenty yet, and Helen, the youngest, is only ten," replied Mrs. Winstead. "I really do not see that I can do anything."

"It is not necessary that you should do anything," reiterated Mr. Lindsay. "I will write to Mr. Atherton and tell him that he has done all that is necessary and the matter can now be dropped."

"I—well, yes—I suppose—" began Mrs. Winstead hesitatingly. "Could it not wait a little while?" she concluded with an air of entreaty.

"Certainly, I can wait your pleasure," said Mr. Lindsay. "Mr. Atherton must be in Denver by this time, and his business there will keep him occupied at least a week. I instructed him to gather all the information that he could without making known that the Merrivale family was in any way connected with these inquiries, for in that way he was much more likely to come at the truth. Now, as soon as you wish me to do so, I will write to this Felix Brant and tell him that his claim is worth nothing, and that any attempt to press it will only involve him in expenses for which he will gain no return."

As he spoke, Mr. Lindsay rose and prepared to make his way back to the station. But Mrs. Winstead seemed perplexed and she passed her hand over her brow with a worried air.

"I suppose that I could ask them to come on here," she began hesitatingly, "but——"

Mr. Lindsay was already out in the hall putting on his overshoes, and he offered no suggestion when Mrs. Winstead followed him out there. He said good-bye pleasantly.

"If you will send me back the letter of young Felix Brant, together with any suggestions that you may desire to make concerning the answer, I will write to him as soon as I receive yours," he said as he stood in the doorway. Then he put up his umbrella and again bent his head against the storm.

"She is a nice little woman, and no doubt a good Christian as Christians go," he thought as he plodded through the deep, newly broken snow on his way back to the station. "But when it comes to a question of personal comfort, people are pretty much the same all the world over. She could invite these people to come to live in the old farmhouse without stinting herself or her children, but it might not be quite as comfortable to have to get along with them at close quarters."

Mr. Lindsay remembered Felix Merrivale as a bright mischief-loving boy in the days when they were both schoolboys, and he had under all his dry, practical habit of life and thought a secret inclination toward this unknown child of his old friend. He would have been ashamed to acknowledge anything so sentimental, and he rigorously refrained from saying a word to influence Mrs. Winstead, but all the time he had hoped that she would want to do something for the daughter and grandson of her uncle.

While Mr. Lindsay was hurrying back to Harriton as fast as the train could take him, Mrs. Winstead had returned to the lessons of the two girls, but her thoughts were not on the history or French verbs, and she was very glad when the lessons were finished and she could go to her own room.

"If it had only been quite settled at the first, and I had received the half of the property, I could have managed," she thought, "and even now I would gladly give them a share; but as it is I do not think that it can be my duty to do anything." She took out Felix Brant's letter and began to read it for the twentieth time, when she was interrupted by the hasty entrance of Bertha.

"Mamma," she exclaimed eagerly, "I quite forgot to tell you that it is the afternoon for the sewing circle to meet, and I promised Mrs. Marshall that I would ask you if you could send any clothing for the box they are going to pack."

"Oh, yes, dear, I am glad that you reminded me," said her mother. "There is that old jacket of yours; it is too small for either you or Jessica, and Helen does not need it. For whom are they packing this box?"

"It is to go to a missionary in Kansas and there are several girls in the family, so the jacket will be sure to come in right for one of them," replied Bertha. "It is quite good and very warm. I am sure Mrs. Marshall will be delighted to have it. They are getting this box off in time for Christmas, and we are going to put in Christmas cards with the things and some toys for the little ones." She chattered away interestedly while her mother went to her wardrobe to take out a jacket, but Mrs. Winstead hardly heeded her words for she was thinking over the case of the other missionary in Colorado who was in need of everything and to whom she was sending nothing. Bertha noticed her inattention and suddenly asked:

"What did Mr. Lindsay have to say? Jane told me he was here. I hope it is not more worry about these people out West."

"Not exactly worry, dear," replied her mother. "He brings me word that there is no chance that they can make good their claim."

"Very well then, you ought to look just as cheerful as I do, mamma," said Bertha saucily. "There could not be better news than that."

"But I find that Mr. Atherton who has seen Mrs. Brant, feels convinced that she really is what she claims to be, the child of my Uncle Felix," said Mrs. Winstead. "And they are very poor and in great need of change from that climate, which is in fact killing Mr. Brant."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," remarked Bertha placidly. "Could not you send them some money, mamma? Through Mr. Lindsay or Mr. Atherton I mean, for of course you don't want to be bothered with relations in that haphazard sort of fashion. They may be very good and worthy people but no doubt they are very tiresome and not at all suited to us."

"Don't make up your mind in that careless way, Bertha," exclaimed Mrs. Winstead, roused by her daughter's indifference. "I did not feel that way. On the contrary, I was hoping that they might be just the kind of people that we should like."

"But, mother dear, what does it matter?" said Bertha good-humoredly. "They are not coming here, and I am not going out there; so we are never likely to meet."

"I am not so sure of that," replied her mother quietly.

"Mamma!" exclaimed Bertha aghast. "You surely are not thinking of asking them to come here?"

"Do you think that it would be a very strange thing to ask of people who are our own cousins?"

"That is just the reason why you ought not to ask them," urged Bertha. "If they were strangers it would not matter; but we don't want to have rough, uncouth people coming here and being introduced to all our friends as our relations."

"My dear, my dear, that is not a kindly or a Christian spirit," said Mrs. Winstead, shocked to hear so bluntly from her daughter's lips the very thoughts that had been unconsciously influencing her own mind.

The color rose in Bertha's cheeks, but as the dinner bell rang at that moment, the conversation was interrupted.

As Bertha went to the sewing circle at three o'clock there was no chance to say anything more about the Brants, and Mrs. Winstead had to keep her thoughts to herself until Mortimer came home, but her mind worked all the more persistently and she was very far from satisfied with herself.

"'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,'" she murmured to herself. "And I am trying only to do enough to quiet my own conscience. When I myself am not inclined to act in a Christian spirit, is it any wonder that my child speaks in an unchristian spirit?"

The result of her self-communing was evident when she found an opportunity to speak to Mortimer that evening. She told him of Mr. Lindsay's visit and the news he brought her, and then she added:

"Now, my boy, I have been thinking over what ought to be done. We have undoubtedly found, by what I cannot consider a mere chance, relations of whose existence we have been ignorant during all their lives. This knowledge has been brought to us just at the time when they are in great need, and I feel sure that God has given us this knowledge because he has a work for us to do."

"Then do you mean that you think we ought to let them have a share of the property?" asked Mortimer thoughtfully.

"I did think of that," replied his mother, much relieved to find that he did not begin with an indignant protest such as Bertha had made; "but Mr. Lindsay tells me that it is impossible, as the principal is not in my power."

"Well, then, I suppose that you could send something out of the income," said Mortimer slowly. "I don't suppose that it would be very much; but when they are so hard up no doubt anything would be a relief to them."

"The only real relief would be to get them away from the climate that does not suit Mr. Brant; and to promise to pay to Mrs. Brant any regular sum would oblige us to leave the farm. I suppose that it would be possible to rent this place and to get a house in Harriton that would cost us less. Otherwise I could not offer anything that would be really of use to them," said his mother, as she played nervously with a pencil that lay on the table beside her.

"That would be a bad alternative," said Mortimer shaking his head; "but surely it would be cheaper to have the whole party here than to split up in that way."

Mrs. Winstead drew a long breath. "Now you have come to exactly my own idea," she said.

"It is only a very hasty idea," said Mortimer. "I am not sure how it would work. Have you suggested it to Bertha?"

"Yes," replied his mother, "and she did not like it at all. Of course, I see that it means having to do with people who are complete strangers to us, and there may be annoyances, even though we know that they are good Christians."

"That is just it," interposed Mortimer. "I am away all day and I have no doubt that I could get along all right with them ; but for you and the girls it would be different, so you must think it over carefully."

"I have thought it over a great deal to-day," replied Mrs. Winstead, "and I can see all the objections ; but when I think of what it means to them I cannot feel otherwise than that the Lord has shown us this work and that he is watching to see whether we will take it up and do it as to him, or whether we will delay and consult our own feelings and likings until it is too late to save the life of his servant, who has been spending his strength in the Lord's work and for whom there may be a great many years of usefulness in store if we give this help just now."

"Then, mother," exclaimed Mortimer, "if you feel that way about it, I can see only one thing to do, and that is to ask them here at once. I had not looked at it just that way, but I believe that you are right."

"My dear boy, I cannot tell you what a comfort it is to me to hear you say that," said his mother earnestly. "I have feared that you would not sympathize with my feeling, and I was really afraid to tell you exactly what I thought."

"You need never be afraid," said Mortimer cheerily, "for I will back you against any one for seeing just the right thing to do and then going ahead and doing it."

A light tap at the door interrupted him and Bertha's face appeared.

"May I come in ?" she asked. "I guessed that Mortimer was here with you, mamma, and I also guessed that you were telling him about Mr. Lindsay's visit, so I thought that I might come in."

"Oh, yes, dear, come in ; I shall be glad to talk with you about our plans," replied Mrs. Winstead, though Mortimer's ear caught a little tinge of nervousness in her tone.

"Now you must help me to persuade mamma that she must take her blessings cheerfully," said Bertha gayly, as she turned to her brother. "If she has told you the whole story, you know that this uncomfortable affair is all settled much better than we could have hoped for, and we only have now to be thankful and to dismiss it all from our minds."

"I don't quite see that," replied Mortimer bluntly. "The fact is that mother and I have arrived at an entirely different conclusion."

He did not fail to notice from the tone of both his mother and his sister that there had been some disagreement between them; and Mortimer's way always was to speak his mind clearly, unless he saw that it would be advisable to hold his tongue altogether.

Bertha made a pretty little pucker of her rosy lips, that was meant to indicate good-tempered expostulation.

"You must not try to persuade our dear, good mamma, who believes that she is sent into the world to befriend everybody in trouble, that she ought to saddle herself with these people, just because they cannot succeed unaided in making us uncomfortable."

"Don't joke, dear," interposed Mrs. Winstead. "I really feel very serious on this matter, and I am very glad to find that Mortimer understands me and agrees with me."

"What does that mean?" asked Bertha, her smile vanishing, and her features beginning to take a stubborn set.

"It means," replied Mortimer, before his mother could reply, "that mother wants to help these people who are, we feel convinced, our cousins, and in great need."

"Very well, send them some money and be done with it," exclaimed Bertha petulantly.

"I cannot do that, dear, for to give them anything that would be of any use to them in this emergency would cost more than I could afford, as long as we live on this place. But there is a way of helping them that is within my power."

"I know what you are going to say," exclaimed Bertha passionately, "and it will spoil our home quite as much as if we had to give up Merrivale farmhouse altogether. Mortimer, you ought to be ashamed to advise mamma to ask strangers here in that reckless way."

"Listen, Bertha," interposed her brother; "you have not even heard yet what there is to be said. Mother feels that this is brought to her knowledge just at this time and in this way, as a bit of work laid in her hands; and while of course I am very glad that we are not obliged by law to pay over a lot of money that would cause, no doubt, a good deal of loss on both sides in selling and getting property in shape for a division, not to speak of all the back interest that we should have to refund, still I think that it is hard lines for Mrs. Brant that she should be left without anything when she needs it so badly."

"It is not only that, my boy," said his mother. "It is that if the Lord has brought to my notice one of his followers, and I refuse to give the help that I can well afford, it will be 'Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.'"

She spoke earnestly and solemnly, but Bertha only bit her lips and answered: "They would think any money a great gain. Send them five dollars, or whatever sum you can afford; but to have that vulgar boy and his mother here would be simply unbearable. I saw his letter, and I know well enough what he is like and what his mother must be."

Mrs. Winstead shook her head with a look of pain, and Bertha added quite angrily:

"Very well, I shall say no more, but we shall all regret it; and I am very much surprised that Mortimer has so little refined feeling. As for me, I can, I suppose, go to Aunt Rachel."

"It is of no use to talk any more to-night," said Mortimer, who wished to spare his mother; and indeed it was a new thing to him to see his pretty, amiable sister in such an unpleasant mood.

"We must all of us ask for guidance from the One whose will we should not merely consider ourselves bound to obey, but should find it our greatest pleasure to obey," said Mrs. Winstead.

"It will take a great deal to pay their fare," said Bertha, struck by a new thought. "Who is going to buy their tickets?"

"I must think it over; perhaps I can manage it," said her mother, trying to speak cheerfully, but Bertha interrupted triumphantly:

"Then send them that money, and let them go to some place in the West that will suit Mr. Brant, instead of spending so much in traveling expenses."

Mrs. Winstead only smiled, and as she evidently did not intend to discuss the subject further that evening, Bertha was obliged to drop it. In her own mind Bertha was only the more determined to raise every possible objection.

"It is a very foolish experiment and will cause so much trouble that I am quite right to do my best to prevent it," she privately reflected. "But it was a mistake to get angry; that never helps one to get one's way." With this resolution she smoothed the wrinkles out of her forehead, and followed her mother and Mortimer to the sitting room, where Jack and the younger girls were playing a game.

CHAPTER VI

MRS. WINSTEAD'S DECISION

MRS. WINSTEAD was now eager to see Mr. Lindsay and to tell him the plan that she had in mind ; but the snow lasted too long for her to go to town that week. Sunday morning dawned bright and clear, and the whole family were able to get to church in spite of the snow-covered ground. Mr. Marshall's sermon was just suited to her frame of mind, and Mrs. Winstead listened earnestly. The pastor himself was evidently very much absorbed in the effort to impress upon his hearers the responsibility of each one as stewards of God, and he urged that all that we possess should be looked upon as the Lord's property, whether it be health, strength, personal advantages, money, or position, all should be steadily used for the Lord's work and according to his will.

Mrs. Winstead waited when the service was over to speak to Mrs. Marshall, and the pastor came up to her and, shaking hands cordially, said :

"I have just heard from a friend of mine who has a church in Kansas City. He writes to me that Mr. Brant, of whom we were speaking the last time that you were at the parsonage, is with him now. I thought, as you seemed to be interested in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Brant, that you would be glad to learn that he is at last in a more suitable climate."

"I am very glad," replied Mrs. Winstead, and Bertha, who was near her, turned with marked interest to listen.

"It is just like Mr. Scott," said Mrs. Marshall. "He and his wife are very kind-hearted people, and, although they have only a very moderate salary, they are always watching to use it to help in the Lord's work. I thought of them while you were preaching this morning, my dear," she added, turning to her husband.

"Are they related to the Brants?" asked Mrs. Winstead.

"Oh, no, they knew them only very slightly; but through the pastor in Colorado Springs they found out that Mr. Brant could pay his way if only he had some place to stay, and as he was growing rapidly worse in that rare atmosphere, Mr. and Mrs. Scott sent them an invitation to make them a visit." Mr. Marshall could not understand why Mrs. Winstead's face flushed so as he spoke, but some one came up with some church news, and he had to turn away.

Mrs. Winstead took Mortimer's arm as they went out, and when the rest had gone a little way ahead of them on the snowy road, she said: "I cannot delay any longer, Mortimer. I must send whatever I can spare to Mrs. Brant and ask them both to come here. I feel that I am letting strangers do my work."

"Don't worry about the money," replied Mortimer. "The fact is, mother, I have been saving as you know, and I had in mind to make a little investment of my own, with the idea of making you a present of a nice little sum before very long; but I really think that you would be better pleased to have it now, and to use it for the Brants."

"You are a dear, good boy," said his mother; "but I don't want to take your earnings. What were you going to invest in?"

"I had not quite decided, but a man came into our office the other day and spoke of several good investments in the West," replied Mortimer.

Mrs. Winstead's brow contracted, but before she could speak Mr. Palmer's sleigh overtook them and Mrs. Palmer's voice called to her to get in.

"It is too bad that you should have to plod all the way through this deep snow, when we could just as well have called for you," exclaimed Mrs. Palmer. "I did think of it last night, but we were late this morning and I forgot to tell James."

Mrs. Winstead smilingly assured her that the walk had not tired her in the least, but she got in as she spoke, for she knew Mrs. Palmer's impulsive nature well enough to be sure that a refusal would vex her.

"Was not that a beautiful sermon?" were Mrs. Palmer's first words as the horses started forward with a merry jingle of bells. I do wish that there was something for me to do at once. I never can feel comfortable after hearing a sermon like that until I have had a chance to help somebody."

"And when you have helped somebody, then you can forget all about it with an easy conscience until the next sermon stirs you up," remarked Mr. Palmer, with a slightly cynical smile as he tucked the sleigh robes about the ladies.

"Really you are too bad," said his wife with a genial laugh. "But nobody can always remember, and then we don't always find things coming up to need our help."

"Is that your idea of the way to apply this sermon, Mrs. Winstead?" asked Mr. Palmer.

Mrs. Winstead was never quite comfortable under Mr. Palmer's questioning, for she never felt sure when he was joking and when he was serious; but she answered quietly:

"I think that those who cannot hope to do as much good as you and Mrs. Palmer, may take courage from that sermon, for it seemed to remind one that one's whole life is the Lord's, and should be used for his service."

"A thing that nobody does or can remember," remarked Mr. Palmer carelessly. "Though I am not a church-member I live in close contact with very good ones; but take my word for it, Mrs. Winstead, the best of them keep a strong hold on their own property. It is so much for the Lord, and the rest I can comfortably enjoy for myself, as I have given a just share. As for their lives, they hold that they were given to them to enjoy. If things go as they like they take care to thank the Lord, and if things go badly they take care to pray to the Lord to make them better or else they lay the blame on the Lord."

"Frank, I won't have you talk in that dreadful way," interrupted his wife, shaking her muff at him. "Mrs. Winstead, he is in one of his critical moods and he can't be content unless he picks everybody to pieces. Don't pay any attention to him. I shall make him give an extra large contribution to the Sunday-school Christmas entertainment as a penance."

"I'm not dreadful," replied her husband good-humoredly. "I am only holding up the mirror for you to see yourself. Remember, Mrs. Winstead, I have implicit faith in my wife; she attends to the religion of the household, and she does it very well too."

They were just then stopping at the gate of the farmhouse, so Mrs. Winstead stepped out and the conversation was at an end; but the effect was not at an end, and Mrs. Winstead went to her room thinking more and more of the way to be really a good steward of the gifts that the Lord had placed in her keeping.

As Bertha came in glowing from the walk through the keen, frosty air, she peeped into the room and said merrily:

"That was good news for you, mamma, that the Brants are provided for without any inconvenience on our part."

"I shall write to Mrs. Brant and send the letter as soon as I have seen Mr. Lindsay to-morrow," replied her mother with quiet decision, which warned Bertha that all expostulations would be useless ; and the young girl went to her own room with a clouded brow.

The next morning was dark and cold, with a biting wind ; but Mrs. Winstead adhered to her resolution and went to town on the early train that Mortimer always took.

Mr. Lindsay was in his office, and he listened with close attention to her proposition.

"I hope that you do not see any obstacle to this," said Mrs. Winstead anxiously, "for I have been troubled by the thought that I could do nothing, and this plan seemed a great relief to my mind."

"It is entirely in your own hands," said Mr. Lindsay. "If you are willing to make this arrangement, no one has the smallest right to hinder you. And," he added after a moment's thought, "I must say that it seems to be a very wise decision on your part. Half the family lawsuits could be avoided if the parties would be wise enough to come to some agreement by which each one would give up a little of individual rights ; and in the end all sides would be the gainers. I know that it is not businesslike on my part to tell you this ; but it is true, even though it does spoil my trade," and he laughed a low chuckle that brought an unusually friendly expression into his keen eyes.

"Do you think that it would be well to say nothing about the relationship ?" asked the little lady doubtfully.

"Hm," said the lawyer, "I see. You think that the acknowledgment of the relationship may cause trouble. It is true that we know very little about the son, and of course if you write to his mother and invite her to your house as your cousin, he may use your admission against you."

"I had not thought of that," said Mrs. Winstead flushing uncomfortably. "I only thought that unfortunately one of my children does not like the arrangement, and that she might be more ready to be friendly with them if they did not at once meet her as cousins, before she has any chance to grow acquainted with them."

"Ah, ha, that is Miss Bertha's way of looking at the matter, is it?" said Mr. Lindsay. "Well, well, she will come around all right; but perhaps, as you suggest, it will be well to give her time to get used to the idea of new relations, and at all events, as there have been no communications between you, there can be no reason why you should make any disclosures as to your family, at least until you know Mrs. Brant better than by mere hearsay."

"Yes, that was my idea exactly," replied Mrs. Winstead, relieved to find that he immediately understood her. "But do you think that they will accept an invitation from an entire stranger?"

"That could be easily arranged by sending word through Mr. Atherton, and I do not doubt that you can write such a letter as would remove any embarrassment that Mrs. Brant might feel," replied Mr. Lindsay. "As for the young man, I can, if you approve, simply write to him stating that Miss Merrivale is dead and the Merrivale property has passed out of my hands."

"There is the letter that I wrote before I came in," said Mrs. Winstead unfolding the sheet. "I can get the address from Mr. Marshall. But about sending the money for their journey East. Could Mr. Atherton attend to that? I could repay him when he arrives, or I could hand the money to you, and you could remit it to Mr. Atherton."

"Certainly, certainly; he will, I am sure, gladly act as their escort East," said Mr. Lindsay. "I will write at once to him—I believe that he intends to return by way of Kansas City—and that will be by far the simplest way to arrange the whole matter."

Mrs. Winstead thanked him and took her leave, as she was now eager to get home and to dispatch her letter.

"Unless I am much mistaken this will be an excellent move for that whole family," thought the lawyer as he closed the door after her. "A man such as I take Mr. Brant to be, will be just the one to have a good influence over that fine boy of hers; and as for dissensions and bad blood between relations, although of course it lines our pockets, I never could see the sense of it where there was any possible chance of a friendly settlement."

Mrs. Winstead had no intention of sending her letter without first showing it to Bertha, and, although the young girl at first opposed bitterly the sending of it, she at last conceded that if the Brants were asked merely to make a visit and no question of relationship was raised, it would be a kindly thing to do.

"Mrs. Palmer had a foreign missionary and his wife visiting at their house for six months," remarked Mortimer.

"You need not quote them," hastily replied Bertha. "I know very well that Mrs. Palmer had been at school with that little lady, and she was a sweet, refined, gentle creature, quite different from Mrs. Brant, I am sure. But if you and mamma are determined to try the experiment, of course it is useless to protest against it. I only prophesy that we shall all be heartily tired of them in a month."

"Do not begin with that determination, dear," said her mother gently. "We may miss a great deal of good in life simply because we focus our eyes to see only what is unpleasant to us."

"I do not think that it will make much difference what I think," replied Bertha; "for when you have these people to support it would not be at all the right thing for me to be at home adding to your expenses, when I can earn money for myself."

"There!" exclaimed Mortimer. "I nearly forgot to tell you that Mr. Palmer asked if we knew of any good teacher who could take beginners who are too young for Mr. Lubeck. He knows of two families in our neighborhood who want a teacher. Of course I said nothing about ourselves until I had a chance to tell you, but I thought that it would be the very thing for you."

"Oh, I think I have a better chance to get good pupils in Harriton," replied Bertha. "I suppose that Mr. Palmer is thinking of Mrs. Howe and Mrs. Jackson. They will want to have the lowest possible terms and the children have no musical talent; it would be simply the most wretched drudgery to teach them."

"Going into Harriton would be extra expense; and then if you got pupils here, you need not waste an hour a day simply going and coming in the train," remarked Mortimer. "Besides, you would be able to help mother with Helen and Jessica."

"Jessica ought to be able to take all Helen's lessons. Why don't you make her take them, mamma? It would be good training for Jessica," said Bertha, turning to her mother. "In fact I have an actual promise of two pupils in Harriton and it would be folly to give that up for the sake of the Howes and Jacksons."

"What Mortimer says about the expense is very sensible, my dear," replied her mother; "and besides that, you know that I dislike very much to have you constantly going in and out on the trains."

"It would avoid all that," said Bertha, "if I arrange to stay in town. The Misses Halsey might let me have a room and I would then be in the same house with Aunt Rachel. It would be a great advantage to me, for I could hear good music, and there are friends of Professor Lubeck's who would help me to get pupils; and Kate Willoughby and her brother also promised to speak to their friends."

"Have you been arranging all this without consulting me at all?" exclaimed her mother, deeply hurt.

"I told you that I ought to get pupils," said Bertha, "and this plan would avoid all annoyance of having people in the same house who do not suit each other; and you could have more room, for you could put Jessica in the little hall room and give my room to Mr. and Mrs. Brant, instead of using the spare room for them."

"Evidently you have thought out the matter in all its details," said Mrs. Winstead; but she did not dare to trust herself to say any more just then, for her heart was very sore.

Mortimer had taken himself off, as he had an innate dislike to discussion or disagreement, and feeling annoyed with Bertha, he did not imagine that any words of his could do any good, at least not at that time.

Mrs. Winstead now looked forward to the Christmas week, as at that time Miss Clive was coming to stay with them, and Aunt Rachel had a strong interest in the family and peculiar tact in smoothing difficulties. In the earlier days of Mrs. Winstead's married life, Aunt Rachel, though her purse was very slender, knew far more about the anxieties and troubles that harassed her niece than did Aunt Jessica, and her kindly sympathy and little helpful ways had often enabled Mrs. Winstead to tide over some difficulty when she had confided it to Aunt Rachel, that had well-nigh disheartened her before. It was not surprising that Mrs. Winstead still looked to her for encouragement and advice. She had not yet been informed of the letter to Mrs. Brant, as Mrs. Winstead had not seen her since her interview with Mr. Lindsay, and it was a difficult matter to explain in the space of the short letters that Mrs. Winstead had the time to write just before Christmas.

CHAPTER VII

PLANS AND PERVERSENESS

THE next morning a letter came from Miss Clive saying that she would come out the following day if Mortimer would stop at Miss Halsey's and take her and her bag to the station with him.

"I did not expect to come before the end of the week," wrote Miss Clive, "but there are some things that I want to talk to you about, so I thought that I would come to you a little sooner, as I am sure that you have no time now to come to me."

This announcement was hailed with great delight by all the family, and when the following evening Mortimer carefully escorted the little lady up the front path, she was seized upon by all three of her grandnieces as soon as she set foot within the front door. A slight deformity of the spine had detracted somewhat from Miss Clive's height, and her features were too strongly marked for beauty ; but the soft white hair and the brown eyes that were sometimes shining with love and sympathy and again sparkled as merrily almost as those of a child, gave a lovely expression to her face.

Mrs. Winstead knew very well that the children would monopolize their aunt the first evening, but she also knew that Aunt Rachel was not a good sleeper, and their most confidential talks generally came after the young people had gone to bed.

She therefore waited patiently until the merry evening was over, and the two older girls had gone with Aunt Rachel to her room. As Mrs. Winstead had made her final inspection of doors, windows, and fires, she heard Bertha and Jessica going to their room, and quietness reigned upstairs. Having finished her round she looked at Helen to be sure that she was sleeping soundly, and then she tapped at Miss Clive's door.

"Come in," said the guest, who was evidently expecting her. "You see how well I am cared for. The girls have done everything for my comfort ; and you, my dear, have only to sit down and let us have a cozy chat."

"I have been looking forward to it all the evening," said Mrs. Winstead, as she seated herself in a low chair beside her aunt. "But before I begin upon my own affairs, you must tell me what you had upon your mind."

"Perhaps it will turn out to be all the same thing," said Miss Clive with a little smile. "I want to know what has spurred up my little musician to such strenuous efforts to earn money."

"Has Bertha written to you about that?" asked Mrs. Winstead surprised.

"Yes," replied her aunt, "and feeling, as you know that I do, that a woman's life should have far nobler aims than mere money getting, I was puzzled and troubled. Have you had any losses that have caused Bertha to become so eager to earn money?"

"No, no, it is not that; but I must explain a long story to you," said her niece, and then she began and told her the whole story about the Brants. "You see, auntie," she said as she finished, "this seems like a reminder to me that all the comforts and the money that I have possessed during the last eight years, have been given to me that I should make the best use of them in doing God's work and helping his servants. I have, you know, had a great deal of trouble and anxiety in former days, and I feel sure that Mrs. Brant's trouble is brought in this unexpected way to my knowledge in order that I may do something for her and her husband. My idea was to invite Mr. and Mrs. Brant to make us a visit; that would, you know, add but slightly to our housekeeping expenses in proportion to the amount of comfort that I could give to them; but unfortunately Bertha does not like the plan at all. She would rather just send them some money and take no further notice of them. When she found that I was unwilling to give up all intercourse with Mrs. Brant, she seemed to be determined to keep herself out of all connection with them."

"I am very sorry that it is my pretty, dainty, musical bird who is causing you all this trouble," said Miss Clive gravely. "But I do not think that it would be right for you to humor a whim of Bertha's which is really founded on unchristian feeling, and which would prevent you from doing what looks to me like a plain duty put before you by the Lord. I know something of Alfred Brant, and from what you tell me he has evidently developed into the kind of man that I expected, one whose whole life and strength is dedicated to the Master's service."

"Yes, that is what I judge from all that I learn; but if you knew him, you can tell me more about him," said Mrs. Winstead eagerly. "Who are his parents? What is he like? Do you know any of his family?"

"Wait, wait," said Miss Clive smiling. "Let me answer these questions before you put any more. His parents are not living; I do not know much about him; his father died and his mother married a second time, and I believe that the relations between the young man and his stepfather were not very cordial."

"Ah! perhaps that explains why he went West," remarked Mrs. Winstead thoughtfully.

"Possibly; but as he talked very little about his family, and never spoke of their private affairs, I do not want you to attach too much importance to the slight knowledge that I had of them. Only I can assure you of this, that at the school and college where I knew him he was looked upon as a very good student and a steady young man of excellent principles. But now tell me what you think of doing about our little musical bird," concluded Miss Rachel, turning aside from the subject of the Brants as though she did not wish to answer any more inquiries.

"That is just the point on which I need your advice," said Mrs. Winstead with a troubled little smile. "Bertha is very set in her own way, though it does not always show. She was very much annoyed at first. Now she is not cross or sulky, but I think she is simply determined that, if she can, she will prevent me from inviting the Brants."

"My dear Mary, that must not be," said Miss Rachel very earnestly. "Bertha is altogether wrong and the time will come when she will see it herself."

"I think that too," replied Mrs. Winstead; "but I am afraid that she will be very chilling to our cousins before she finds it out, and it may even make them unwilling to stay."

"Why not let her try her own plan?" asked Miss Rachel. "She is old enough to learn by experience better than by precept, and I have just thought of an arrangement—if it can be made. Ann Halsey will soon give up the big house that she has now—she says that she and Rebecca are too old to carry it on—and they have taken a smaller house on the opposite side of the street. I am like one of the family with them, and they will have room for me, and in the smaller house, where we shall be just by ourselves, Bertha might come to me, and it would be almost like a home for her. It would be quiet and retired and you could be sure that she would be well taken care of. She wrote to me that she had already heard of pupils in very nice families in Harriton, and of course under these circumstances it would be a good thing if she was earning something, as you could more easily do something for Mrs. Brant."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Winstead; "and also, Aunt Rachel, I cannot feel sure that the proofs may not be found that would give Mrs. Brant the share of property due to Uncle Felix, and in that case the children must do for themselves as far as possible. But I am afraid that even with the pupils that she speaks of, Bertha would not be able to pay her board in Harriton."

"Ann Halsey does not count on making money by boarders," said Miss Rachel, "and if Bertha could pay just enough to cover the extra table expense, I am sure that it would be all right. At first when they talked of moving and I found that they had really taken the other house, I felt pretty badly, for I am old to change from the room and the house that I have lived in so many years; but now I think that the Lord was planning all for us. In the other house they had no extra room and one did not know exactly whom one might meet; but this will be just quiet and homelike. Now you must go off and sleep over it, and let me know how it looks to you to-morrow."

Mrs. Winstead kissed her, and went away thinking to herself: "The Lord planned the greatest blessing to me when he planned Aunt Rachel. She always sees a way out of difficulties and helps me over troubles."

The night's rest only made the plan look more suitable to Mrs. Winstead, and Bertha, when it was mentioned to her, accepted it with great good-will.

"I am sure that I shall soon have more pupils," she said, "and then I can easily pay all my expenses and send home money that you will find that you need, mamma."

"I can suggest another pupil at once," said Aunt Rachel. "Mrs. Davenant wants a teacher for her little Myrtle."

"That dear little creature who was out here last summer at Mr. Palmer's?" inquired Bertha. "Oh, she would be just lovely to teach!"

Aunt Rachel promised to write to Mrs. Davenant, as she was acquainted with her.

In the interest of all these plans Bertha almost forgot about the Brants; but on Christmas morning a letter in a strange handwriting lay upon Mrs. Winstead's plate at the breakfast table. Mrs. Winstead tore it open at once and Bertha, who was guilty of the impropriety of covertly watching her mother while she read it, saw that her eyes filled with tears.

As soon as she had finished the letter Mrs. Winstead looked up and said quietly:

"Children, I expect visitors early in January to spend some time with us."

Immediately there was a chorus of questions from Helen and Jack that quite drowned Mortimer's quiet remark, "So you have an answer. Well, I am glad to hear it."

Fortunately the chatter served also to cover Bertha's silence, and it was only Jessica who noticed the way that the news was received by the older ones. The children had to be informed of the names of the visitors, and various other questions were showered upon their mother until she had at last to tell them that they must wait until Mr. and Mrs. Brant could answer in person, and made her escape from the breakfast table. Bertha had already gone to the parlor, and she was standing by the piano turning over her music, when her mother followed her and handed her the letter.

She took it reluctantly. She did not wish to be appealed to, or in any way to appear to be interested in the matter, but she did feel a little curiosity as to how Mrs. Brant would write a letter. As her eye fell on the yellow stamped envelope with the printed admonition in the corner to return if not called for in five days, she raised her eyebrows fastidiously, and her expression as she drew out the sheet of ruled commercial note-paper made Mrs. Winstead flush, half with indignation and half with disappointment, but she controlled herself, thinking that when Bertha had read it she would feel differently.

It was a warm-hearted, impulsive outpouring of gratitude to God and to her unknown friend for the chance that this invitation held out to Mr. Brant of renewed health and usefulness ; and Mrs. Winstead, remembering vividly her own distress when her husband was ill and she was in extreme poverty, had been deeply touched by Mrs. Brant's wifely anxiety for her husband and her eager hope that he might be benefited by this visit. Bertha, with the indifference of a young girl who has seen mainly the sunny side of life, only noted critically that "benefitted" was spelled with two "t's" ; and where an allusion to the necessary separation from her son had made Mrs. Winstead's heart ache for the lonely mother-heart leaving an only child in order to come with an invalid husband to total strangers, Bertha's quick eyes fastened on a faulty "e" in "seperation."

"I suppose poverty will serve to excuse the paper and envelope," said the girl carelessly as she handed back the letter, "but that will hardly cover the mistakes in spelling. Still, on the whole, she really writes and spells better than I expected."

"Are you pretending to be so unfeeling?" said Mrs. Winstead irritably.

"Oh, mamma, you know that she is a complete stranger to me," replied Bertha. "I can sympathize with people that I know, but to cry over that letter would be just like crying over a story book, all imagination."

"I have seen you cry over a piece of music," said her mother gently. Her irritation quickly vanished, and she told herself that it was only the unconscious cruelty of youth that cannot perceive what it has never felt.

"Yes," said Bertha musingly; "but that is something real. It does not write to you, it speaks to you," she added with a little laugh. "Now, mother dear, don't be vexed with me because I cannot pretend what I do not feel."

"I am not vexed, I am only anxious, dear," said her mother.

"Then you need not be that," replied Bertha gayly. "You can try your experiment and I can try mine, and if both succeed, so much the better. But privately I believe that you will be glad to get rid of yours, and maybe you hope that I shall be unsuccessful in mine."

"Oh, no, dear," replied her mother quickly.

"At least you think me very self-willed; but really I have been so good and self-denying that I do deserve to have my own way a little bit now," said Bertha saucily. She was looking into a golden future of unlimited music, and of money belonging entirely to herself to do as she pleased with, and she was so intoxicated with the prospect that she really cared very little for anything else. Even the Brants she was almost willing to consider a blessing in disguise, provided that she did not have to come in contact with them, or to own that they were cousins.

"My child, you cannot make bargains with the Almighty like that," replied her mother gravely. "The Lord desires of us that our way should be his way in everything, or else trouble and disappointment are sure to follow."

"Hush, hush. You must not prophesy evil on Christmas morning," said Bertha playfully, laying both hands over her mother's mouth and kissing her forehead.

Mrs. Winstead kissed the pretty hands as she gently removed them, but she answered fervently :

"I would not prophesy evil to you, my child, for I will not believe that you would choose the way that is sure to bring evil in its train. God grant that you may in everything strive to know his will and to do it, and then your life will surely be a happy and a successful one."

With these words she went away to find Mortimer and to show the letter to him and to Aunt Rachel. Bertha stood for a short time feeling uncomfortably puzzled and awed. Soon, however, the notes of the piano stole softly through the half-opened door, and Mrs. Winstead said sadly to Aunt Rachel :

"That will efface all remembrance of my words."

"Who can tell when the seed that is planted will bear fruit?" said Aunt Rachel cheerily. "And remember, Niece Mary, that your children must learn to use their knowledge for themselves."

"If only they don't make mistakes," sighed Mrs. Winstead.

"They are sure to do that," replied Aunt Rachel briskly. "Did you ever know of a young girl like Bertha getting at her knowledge and making a good use of it before she had first shoveled out a good lot of ignorance that was blocking the doorway of her usefulness?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE ARRIVAL OF MR. AND MRS. BRANT

THE winter had set in early and showed no signs of relenting at the beginning of the new year. Snow lay thick over meadow and woodland around Briarley; and according to the old adage, as the days began to lengthen the cold began to strengthen. One still, cold night, when the snow lay frostily under foot and myriads of stars shone with a clear, metallic light in the dark blue vault overhead, Merrivale farmhouse was evidently in a state of preparation and expectancy. Mortimer's train had gone up an hour before, but the young man himself had not arrived, and the supper table still stood untouched. The dining room bore a particularly festive appearance, and the front shutters had not been closed nor the curtains drawn.

"Let the light shine out to greet them," said Mrs. Winstead. "It looks more like a welcome to people who arrive in a strange place after dark."

Jessica and Helen were fluttering about, putting last touches and talking eagerly about the expected guests; while Jack, in private inward disgust and outward calm disdain for "all this splutter," had ensconced himself in the schoolroom with "The Last of the Mohicans." The jingle of sleigh-bells and the thud of horses' hoofs on the snow brought Mrs. Winstead to the front door just as Mr. Palmer's handsome sleigh stopped before the little gate. With the kindly thoughtfulness that the Palmers often showed to Mrs. Winstead, their sleigh had been offered to meet the guests who were expected at the farmhouse that evening.

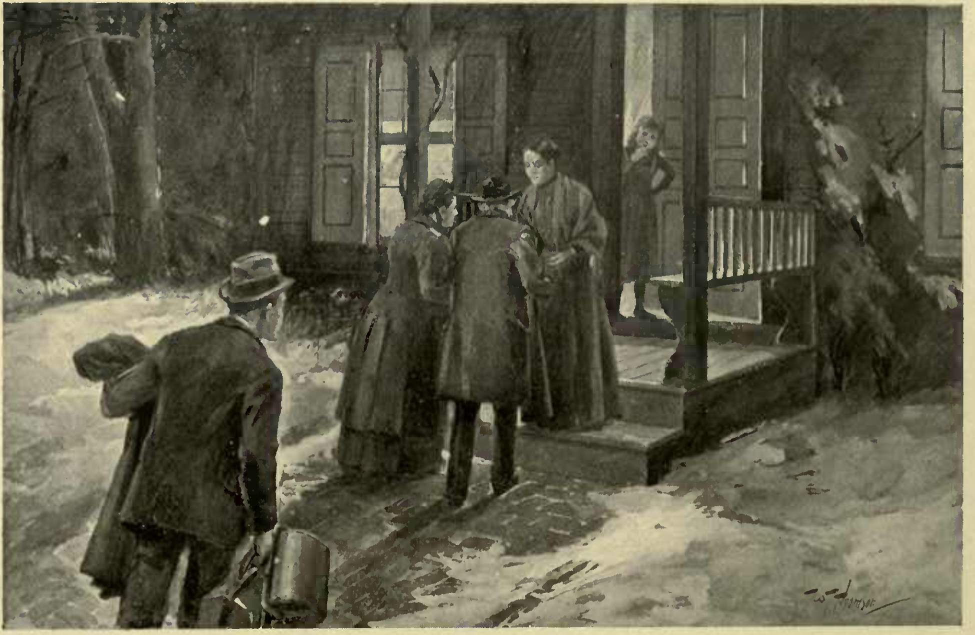
Mortimer sprang out and then turned to help out his two companions ; Mrs. Winstead saw that much through the starlit night and her heart fluttered nervously as she felt that the strangers who had come so unexpectedly into her life were really at the gate. But she held out her hands cordially as they came slowly up the path, and she drew them into the warm hallway saying kindly :

"I am glad to see you. Come and warm yourselves before going upstairs. You must be very cold and tired after your long journey."

Mr. Brant removed his soft felt hat and the rays of the hall lamp fell upon his high, bald forehead, lighting up a thin, pale face, whitening hair and beard, and mild but very weary-looking blue eyes.

"We are certainly fatigued," he said in slow, gentle tones. "But we have every cause to be thankful that we have been permitted to reach our journey's end so comfortably and with so little delay. The winter has been very severe in the West, and many trains have been delayed by storms."

Mrs. Winstead felt the tears rising to her eyes as she noticed his great weakness and his gentle, patient manner. Then she glanced quickly at Mrs. Brant. That good lady's stout figure was encased in a thick, close-fitting ulster that made her look shorter and broader than she really was. Her bonnet was a neat, dark affair well suited to her plain, sensible face, but it had unfortunately just received a push that had cocked it over on one side in a style that forced Mrs. Winstead, in her present nervous and excited mood, to bite her lips quickly to avoid a smile. Mrs. Brant herself, whose keen gray eyes were watching her husband



"They came slowly up the path."

The Merrivale Will.

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anxiously and rapidly taking note of Mrs. Winstead, was evidently entirely oblivious of her own appearance or the impression that she might produce.

"You are just as kind and thoughtful as can be," she said in quick, decided tones. "Yes, Mr. Brant ought to sit down and rest before he tries to walk upstairs, for he is shaky and our heads are spinning with the rattle of the cars for two days and nights."

Mrs. Winstead led the way at once into the parlor while Mortimer, who had come in with the satchels and wraps, helped Mr. Brant off with his overcoat. Jessica and Helen came forward to be introduced and Mrs. Brant greeted them in an outspoken, cordial fashion that set them at ease with her at once.

As both her guests sat down to rest, Mrs. Winstead drew a sigh of relief as she thought that the long-dreaded and nervously expected meeting was over.

Mrs. Brant was, however, far too energetic to sit still long. She heard footsteps on the stairs, and exclaiming that she was sure that must be their trunk and she had better go and tidy herself, she jumped to her feet. To Mrs. Winstead's surprise, Jessica, who always kept in the background when strangers were present, now came forward and of her own accord offered to show Mrs. Brant her room.

"Yes, do," said that lady quickly. "I'll answer for it that your mother has had plenty of running up and down stairs to-day, and I would like ever so much to have you just take me in hand and show me my way about, so that I won't need to bother people all the time. You'll have lots to teach me about Eastern ways of living and doing things."

They disappeared upstairs and as soon as Mr. Brant had warmed himself a little and recovered his breath he followed.

Mrs. Winstead then went in search of Jack, but he was shy and averse to making his appearance until the tea bell rang and he had to come to the dining room. At the table he ate his supper in unusual silence until the talk drifted to life in mining camps and adventures in the Rocky Mountains. Then Jack's eyes began to sparkle and happening to catch Mr. Brant's glance resting with sympathetic interest on his bright face, the boy soon found his tongue, and questions began to pour out so rapidly that before long his mother smilingly interposed.

"My boy, you have evidently found a perfect mine of interesting stories in Mr. Brant, but as he has had a long and tiring journey, you must take care of him to-night and see that he has a good supper and plenty of rest."

That was enough to make Jack at once consider himself as responsible for Mr. Brant's well-being.

When their guests had retired for the night, which they did very early, Jack remarked :

"I hope that Mr. Brant will hurry up and get well, for he is going to be just jolly, if only he gets a little stronger."

"I like Mrs. Brant," declared Jessica ; "she is not a bit like anybody that I have seen before."

"She is not finicky or nervous, and I should not wonder if she turned out to be pretty good fun—that is for a woman," said Jack grandly.

After the "little ones" had gone to bed the mother and son sat down to talk over the day.

"I think that you may feel pretty well satisfied thus far, mother," said Mortimer. "They seem to be nice, unaffected people, and they are not rough and coarse as Bertha had made up her mind that they would be ; though I must say that it was a fortunate thing that Aunt Rachel had carried off Bertha, for that ulster and the cocked-over bonnet would, I am afraid, have spoiled all Mrs. Brant's chances of finding favor in her eyes," and he glanced comically at his mother.

Mrs Winstead smiled dubiously as she answered,

"I am afraid that you are right, dear ; but Bertha must learn that the world is not to be judged entirely by rules of prettiness and neatness. I do miss her sorely," she added with a sigh.

"Of course you do," replied Mortimer promptly, "and so do I ; but she will be all the better for spending a little time under Aunt Rachel's wing, and she will come around all right, mother ; so do not be down-hearted. Now there is something that I want to ask about. Of course as soon as Mrs. Brant hears the name of Merrivale she will prick up her ears and begin to ask questions ; what do you mean to tell her?"

"Exactly the truth, my boy," said Mrs. Winstead decidedly.

"Then I suppose the matter will soon get talked about and Bertha will be very cross," said Mortimer doubtfully.

"Oh, no," replied his mother confidently. "Bertha will come out soon to see us, and then she will meet Mr. and Mrs. Brant and her feelings will change. Indeed, before she left she seemed to feel more pleasantly about the matter. I think that sometimes the mere fact of speaking out all their disagreeable feelings makes persons ashamed of them. A grievance will look very small when spoken of, though if brooded over it would grow to an enormous size."

She spoke so cheerfully and confidently that Mortimer could not bring himself to suggest that Bertha's pleasantness was far more due to the fact that she saw everything fitting in exactly to suit her wishes, than to any shame at her own words. The sound of footsteps on the porch prevented any further conversation and relieved Mortimer from the necessity of making any reply.

"It is late for any one to call in the country," said Mrs. Winstead, glancing at the clock which was on the stroke of nine. "I hope it is not a telegram or bad news."

But Mortimer was already opening the front door and in another moment Mrs. Winstead heard the sound of a man's voice which she recognized with a slight frown. She had scarcely time to smooth her forehead before Mark Willoughby entered the room, saying courteously:

"I am ashamed to disturb you so late, Mrs. Winstead, and on the first evening of your friends' arrival, but when Miss Bertha heard that I was coming out here this evening with Kate she commissioned me to ask for some of her music that she needs. I believe it is something that Kate and Miss Bertha wish to practise together."

Mark Willoughby could be very agreeable when he was in the mood, and this evening his manner to Mrs. Winstead was faultless. She found herself unconsciously relaxing her feeling of distrust as she talked with him while Mortimer busily turned over the sheets of music at the piano. But when the music was all found and tied up and Mr. Willoughby had gone off, she recalled with painful distinctness that she had warned Bertha the evening before her departure, not to be drawn into any intimacy with Kate and Mark Willoughby.

"My words did not make much impression," she thought, and as Mortimer returned to the room after locking the door behind Mark Willoughby, she said with annoyance clearly shown in her tones: "I wish that you had kept that package to take it yourself to Bertha. I do not like to have Mr. Willoughby visiting her, now that she is away from me."

"He is not going to take her the music. He couldn't, for he has to be at Harvey & Blake's office by half-past eight in the morning, and that is beyond our office, quite in the opposite direction from Miss Halsey's. I thought that it was a good thing that Miss Willoughby would take the roll, for it would make me late to have to go around that way."

Mortimer spoke lightly and cheerfully as he looked after shutter bolts and got ready to say good-night, and he added, "Willoughby seems to be a pleasant, good-tempered sort of fellow."

"Pleasant and good-tempered," murmured Mrs. Winstead. "Oh, if that was all that was needed——"

But Mortimer interrupted her, saying:

"Well, mother, it goes a good way, and further than some good people think. Why I know fellows who are really good, square, honest men, but they are so wretchedly disagreeable to talk to that nobody wants them around. They don't seem to have a particle of cheerfulness or tact."

"My boy," said his mother earnestly, laying her hand on his arm, "stick to the good, square, honest man every time. A rogue will lose all his pleasantness and his tact as soon as he gets into serious difficulties, and he will leave the stain of his own roguery on his friends as well."

"Upon my word, mother, you are not very complimentary to Mark Willoughby," exclaimed Mortimer, looking at her in surprise. "What do you know against him?"

"Nothing that would be against him as you mean," said his mother, flushing nervously. "But, Mortimer, he is not walking in the path you are treading, he does not serve the Master whom you serve; don't you think that is against him as a really reliable friend?"

"I suppose that I ought to say yes," replied Mortimer;

"but I know people who are not Christians who are very trusty friends. There is Mr. Palmer; he has been a good friend to me."

"Yes, but a good Christian character can take on all the outward polish in time; and where there is not that basis one cannot be sure that worldly motives will not eat holes in the outward charm," said his mother.

"Perhaps that is true," said Mortimer thoughtfully; "but all the same, people get awfully taken in about Christian character. I have heard Mr. Palmer say that some of the biggest cheats that he ever had to deal with, carried on operations under the reputation of being good Christians. There is Mr. Higginbotham, who is always giving by the thousands to good objects where much better people have to be content to slip in a little mite that nobody notices and that does no great good."

"Nobody notices!" repeated Mrs. Winstead. "Whose notice do we seek to gain? If our little deed is done in the right spirit, do you imagine that our Lord fails to notice it? His approval is our highest aim, and he can never be taken in by any false show of service; and the man who lives in close communion with the Divine Master possesses the Ithuriel spear that detects falsehood with a touch."

"I wish that one could possess that spear literally," said Mortimer with a rueful smile. "It is a wretched feeling that one may be taken in through one's kindest and best inclinations."

"That I do not believe," said Mrs. Winstead with unusual energy. "If we are giving close heed that our motives and our aims are pure, and that our own character is kept white, as only the closest contact with our Lord can keep it, we shall detect falseness in the character of others as surely as you would see a yellow cast in my clean handkerchief if you compared it with that new-fallen snow.

"That is a good simile," replied Mortimer with a little laugh. "Mr. Marshall ought to get you to help him with his sermons. Honestly, little mother, I do believe that you can make good work of anything that you choose to turn your hand to, whether it is housekeeping or teaching or preaching sermons."

"The measure of my success rests in your hand," said his mother with a simple earnestness which startled Mortimer. "If my children start right and hold to the right, serving the Lord as they have now in their youth the chance to do, with none of the miserable hampering that comes from an evil past record that must be lived down and counteracted—then I may feel that I have been successful."

Mortimer did not reply, but every trace of playful banter was gone from his face as he bent his tall figure to kiss her good-night, and the clear light in his eyes and the purposeful set of his mouth, filled his mother's heart with gladness.

It was her great desire that these children entrusted to her by the Lord should be brought as an offering meet for his acceptance ; and when she found that she relied more on her eldest son and felt most anxiety for her eldest daughter, it only made her the more eager in prayer.

When she reached her room the feeling of joy and thankfulness that had filled her heart as she bade Mortimer good-night was disturbed by the remembrance of her last admonition to Bertha. She had spoken to her very frankly about the choice of companions, and had expressed her opinion of Kate Willoughby and her brother more freely than at any time before, when Bertha was constantly under her own eye.

"But she is such a nice, bright girl, with just my tastes," Bertha had urged.

"That may be in some respects," said Mrs. Winstead. "But do you think that she cares at all for what you hold to be the highest and holiest?"

"She is not a church-member, and I do not think that she cares much about religion," admitted Bertha. "But she goes to church regularly, and she is never in the least inclined to make light of such matters; only they do not interest her."

"Then she cannot be the one who will help you to take a constantly increasing and more effectual interest," replied her mother; "and if your Christian life is to reach its highest usefulness you need those who will help you and sympathize with you. You feel the need of sympathy in your love of music; why should you not feel it in this far higher love?"

"Oh, do not be afraid; Kate could not injure me in that way," said Bertha confidently. "In fact, I find that my friends are more likely to be led by me than to lead me."

"In that case you have all the more need to follow closely in the footsteps of the only true Leader," her mother had replied. She had no desire to engage in any fruitless discussion on the girl's last evening at home; but in her heart she wondered a little at Bertha's blindness, for she knew that her daughter was very susceptible to the influence of her companions.

All this rushed into her mind as she thought over the indications that she had received that evening, of Bertha's intimacy with the Willoughbys; and she laid her head on the pillow with a weary presentiment of coming evil.

CHAPTER IX

HAMILTON, MINING AGENT

MRS. Winstead was so much occupied with thoughts of her daughter, that the question raised by Mortimer on the evening the Brants arrived slipped out of her mind, and although Mr. and Mrs. Marshall called, and other friends came to see her guests, it did not once occur to her to wonder whether the name of Merrivale had been used in their hearing.

She was slowly and very unwillingly but none the less surely, coming to the conclusion that Mortimer ought to be in town with his sister. Bertha wrote very cheerfully and was evidently delighted with her success. Myrtle Davenant was her pet pupil and Mrs. Davenant fascinated her.

This was not surprising, as Mrs. Davenant was a very beautiful and charming woman. She had the talent of not forgetting people whom she met, and to this she added the grace that she never willingly spoke ill of any one. Her other children had died in infancy, and she was painfully anxious about Myrtle. Bertha's ladylike manners and gentle but decided way of teaching pleased her from the first, and she gladly made the arrangement that Myrtle should take daily short lessons instead of longer semi-weekly ones, as was the case with more advanced pupils. At the end of each lesson Myrtle always begged for "a little real music now," and Mrs. Davenant frequently came in to listen while Bertha played. The lessons were liberally paid for, and, apart from this satisfaction, the hours spent in this luxurious drawing room with treasures of art on every side and the magnificent grand piano, were sheer delight to Bertha.

Besides all this her other pupils were not uninteresting; she was asked to various little musical gatherings; and she was able to keep track of all the concerts, private or public. Naturally she wished to attend them, and here came Miss Clive's serious trouble, for it was not possible always to secure a suitable escort for the young girl. Miss Ann and Miss Rebecca Halsey petted her, and she in her turn did her best to make her presence in the house a pleasure to them by her brightness and thoughtfulness, so that they were not only willing but eager that she should have all the amusement possible.

"It is too bad to keep a young girl cooped up, Rachel," expostulated Miss Ann one evening when Miss Clive had objected to Bertha's going out with Mark and Kate Willoughby. "Why doesn't her brother come in and take her?"

When the next morning a letter came from Mrs. Winstead suggesting that Mortimer should stay in town if Miss Halsey was able and willing to give him a room in their house, Miss Clive looked upon it as providential and at once consulted with Miss Ann as to necessary arrangements.

Bertha welcomed the plan with delight when it was mentioned to her on her return from her morning lessons; but she did not agree to her aunt's suggestion that she should go out to Briarley to tell her mother what arrangements could be made.

All her excuses were very trivial, but they prevailed, as Miss Clive felt that it was useless to urge her when she did not herself desire to go.

"Mr. and Mrs. Brant don't know or care anything about me, and mamma promised to come in to see me this week,'' said Bertha, as a final settlement of the matter, and Miss Clive quietly sat down to write Miss Halsey's willing agreement to the plan that Mortimer should take up his abode with them.

No one could be long in Jessica's company without hearing of her beautiful sister, for whom she had such deeply rooted affection and admiration, and as Mrs. Brant took a great liking to careless, good-tempered, self-forgetful Jessica, and the liking was strongly reciprocated by the girl herself, it was only natural that she should soon feel pretty well acquainted with Bertha as seen through Jessica's eyes. Jessica also had an equally good opportunity to become thoroughly informed of the good qualities of Mrs. Brant's son Felix, for Mrs. Brant was as pleased to find an interested listener for her talk about him as Jessica was for her descriptions of Bertha's merits.

The mention of the Merrivale name came at a time when Mrs. Winstead had temporarily forgotten the subject. It was just after the arrangement had been made that Mortimer should go to Miss Halsey's, and he was to leave home so soon that his mother's thoughts were entirely occupied with him. One clear, bright, cold morning after he had left for the train, the two ladies were still at the breakfast table looking over their letters, and Jessica, who had overslept herself, came in just as her brothers and Helen left the room. One of Mrs. Winstead's letters bore the postmark Colorado Springs, and on opening it she found to her surprise that it was from Felix Brant.

He wrote in very manly, straightforward style, thanking her for her kindness to his parents, and the whole tone was so pleasant and frank and showed such strong affection for his parents, that the unpleasant impression left upon Mrs.

Winstead by the only other letter she had seen in his handwriting rapidly faded. It was not till she came to the last page that her cheeks flushed and she winced a little.

"You must not think," he wrote, "that because my parents are far away from me, and have found a kind friend in you, that I have forgotten to work and plan for their comfort. If relations were as kind to us as those who are no kin have shown themselves, my mother might be comfortably provided for; but at least she shall have every cent that her son can earn for her."

Then came the signature in full, "Felix Merrivale Brant."

Mrs. Winstead had felt so kindly toward this unknown lad that it hurt her to find that he was still thinking ill of the Merrivale family. At the same time she noticed that Mrs. Brant held in her hand a letter in the same handwriting and Jessica who was talking to her about her son, said:

"Isn't it funny, mamma, Mrs. Brant's son has the same name as our aunt? He is Merrivale Brant and she was Miss Merrivale."

Here was the very question that Mrs. Winstead had anticipated, and it gave her the opening that she thought she wanted; but as she had not meant to talk to Mrs. Brant on that subject before the children, she only said quietly as she rose from the table:

"Yes, Mrs. Brant and I must compare notes on our family histories and find out how that happens."

"Oh, I suppose it just chanced so," replied Mrs. Brant, with the indifference of one who had lived in a Western town where people's grandfathers were little known and less inquired about. "It struck me a little queerly at first, that your daughter has the same name as an aunt of my father ; but, dear me, lots of people drifted out to Kansas from all parts, and they might live next door and have the same name without being any kin—that is to say, short of Adam. There was a man at Muddy Gulch beyond Silverbush who had the name of Brant ; but I'm glad to say he was no kin to my husband. We don't fuss over those things the way I've been told that Eastern people do," she added with a little laugh.

She got up as she spoke and went to the door and Jessica followed her. Mrs. Brant always made her own bed and dusted her room in the morning, as she had been used to do ever since she was married. She would not allow Jane to touch it, but she did not always decline Jessica's help if she thought that the girl was not needed elsewhere, and Jessica was eager to be with her on any pretext.

Mrs. Winstead was half vexed as she watched them go off together, and realized that the explanation which she considered had now been forced upon her was coolly set aside. She inwardly determined to bring it up again at the first opportunity when she could speak with Mrs. Brant alone. But the opportunity did not come throughout the day, and after tea Mr. Brant, who had taken a little cold, went to his room early, and his wife going upstairs with him did not reappear.

Mrs. Winstead was obliged to fall back upon her usual resource of talking matters over with Mortimer after Helen and Jessica had gone to bed.

Mortimer read the letter that she handed him and then she told him of Jessica's remark and of her own desire to have done with anything that looked like concealment.

"Yes, I think it would be much better to explain about our relationship to the Merrivales," said Mortimer thoughtfully. "Then they can tell us just as much or as little as they please about themselves. The fact is that a man who came to see me at the office to-day just as I was leaving, told me something about a young fellow he knows of out West who wants to push a claim to our property. He said that the young man might give us a lot of trouble but that he could fix it all up if I liked."

"Who was he, and what did you say?" asked Mrs. Winstead anxiously.

"His name is Hamilton, and I have seen him in there once or twice before, talking to Mr. Palmer. He is agent to sell some mining stock," replied Mortimer. "I didn't say anything to him, but just let him talk. I was in a hurry to catch my train, so he had not time to say much."

"Surely I remember that name," said Mrs. Winstead. "I think that it was when your father began to go into those speculations that turned out so badly. Yes, now I have it. Robert Hamilton was the name of the man who led him into the affair; but it may not be the same man. He must have been well over thirty then, and I should think that he would be nearly fifty now."

"This fellow is, I should say, somewhere between forty-five and fifty, small and jaunty, with reddish hair and moustache," said Mortimer.

Mrs. Winstead looked alarmed and exclaimed: "My dear boy, I really think that it must be the same man! Promise me that you will have nothing to do with him. He is very deceitful and dishonest. I do hope that he has not been trying to poison the mind of that nice, frank boy, Felix, or to get him in his power. He would probably try to fill his mind with all sorts of false stories about us."

"I don't think that," said Mortimer. "I have met him before and he was quite friendly. In fact he wanted me to invest in the mining stock."

"Oh, I hope that you have not been so imprudent!" exclaimed his mother.

"No," replied Mortimer. "I did think of it a little, as it seemed to be pretty good; but when this about the Brants came up I thought that you would need ready cash more than any investments for future fortunes, so I told him that I did not care to take any shares."

"I am most thankful," said his mother. "Certainly the Brants have unconsciously done you a good turn in that. But I am so afraid that the man will try to make us trouble."

"Don't worry about that," said Mortimer; "I don't believe that he was working any regularly planned scheme. It probably just struck him when he saw me, that he might squeeze some money out of us with this tale, and by the way, I think that he had just been unsuccessful in getting Mr. Palmer to listen to him. Anyway, I shall have nothing to do with him; so you can set your mind at rest."

"Well, I shall take the first opportunity to recall the subject to Mrs. Brant, and I shall tell all about our Aunt Jessica," said Mrs. Winstead resolutely. "Then she can tell me just what she pleases; but we shall be practising no concealment. I am very glad that we have talked this all over to-night, for this will be the last evening for some time that I can talk things over with you."

"Don't be downhearted about that," said Mortimer cheerily, as he noticed the quiver that passed over his mother's face. "I shall take up my position as guardian brother to Bertha to-morrow, but I shall not forget to keep an eye on the house out here, and I shall be to and fro."

"Keep yourself always close to the true Guardian and all will go well with you, my son," replied his mother, and with a good-night kiss she went slowly upstairs, watching until his lamp had vanished in the room he shared with Jack.

CHAPTER X

MORTIMER MAKES A LOAN

BERTHA was very much pleased when she found that Mortimer was really coming to stay in town. She cared nothing especial for Mark Willoughby or any other young man, but she did care very much if she was obliged to miss any musical treat. Prof. Lubeck had not only procured her some pupils, but he had also made her acquainted with musical people, some of whom were professionals and some amateurs. Miss Rachel was decidedly out of her element among the people who came to see Bertha, but she had the instinct of a lady and the training of a Christian to assist her in forming opinions of them, and to some of them she objected in her quiet but decided way. It pleased her to see that Bertha took any advice that she gave very sweetly, and any person whom she distinctly disapproved came more rarely to the house.

For Mortimer an entirely new life seemed to begin from the first evening that he passed the Harriton station and went to Miss Halsey's, instead of taking the usual train to Briarley. Bertha had complimentary tickets for a concert that night, and was watching eagerly for his arrival, to claim his escort. She had also an invitation to a private rehearsal of a singing society, and the organist of the church where her father had formerly played wanted her to come some evening to hear an Easter anthem that his choir was practising.

Mortimer had inherited enough of his father's love of music to enjoy all this, and there was a fascination in the life and stir of the city that his quiet, self-controlled nature had hardly foreseen. He had intended to place himself at Bertha's disposal, but otherwise he had meant to be very much the same as he had been at Briarley. He began by telling Bertha home news and home plans, but she was easily satisfied as long as she knew that all were well at home; and at any mention of the Brants she changed the subject so persistently and adroitly that Mortimer did not get a chance to tell her that the question of relationship was to be fully explained. At first he felt repelled and was rather silent, but soon the companionship of young people about his own age drew him out, and he found that he and Bertha had more things in common to talk about.

Mark Willoughby was particularly friendly and pleasant, and it was flattering as well as agreeable to so young a man as Mortimer to find that one several years his senior, and well used to city life, had taken a decided liking for his society. Mortimer had not in the least forgotten his mother's warning and he did not mean to make an intimate friend of Mark, but he was not displeased to find that Mark was apparently inclined to make an intimate friend of him.

One day toward the latter part of February Mrs. Winstead came to town and stopped at the office at the hour when Mortimer was ready to leave.

Mortimer hurried on his overcoat and hat, and they walked slowly along the lighted streets in the direction of the station.

"Have you had your talk with Mrs. Brant?" asked Mortimer; "and how did it turn out?"

"No, I have not mentioned the Merrivales," replied his mother; "and the truth is, Mortimer, I have been thinking more about other matters. You know Mr. Brant had taken cold when you left, and he seemed quite pulled down for a time ; but I was shocked to discover that the real reason of his cold was that he had gone outdoors with positively insufficient clothing. Jane told me that his underclothing was not fit to keep any one warm in the depth of winter; and his overcoat, although it looked very respectable, was really a light overcoat only fit for spring wear or fall. I felt dreadfully, and I spoke to Mrs. Brant and insisted that she must let me furnish her with what was needed to get good warm clothing."

"Could you manage it, mother?" asked Mortimer.

"Oh, yes, I persuaded her, and she told me that he had had rough heavy clothes that he used to wear at Silverbush, but they were hardly fit for him to wear here, and they seemed to have thought that it would be very much milder here in the winter. At all events, they left the heavy clothes for Felix, who would find them very useful and necessary in ranch life; and when they came here Mr. Brant discovered that he felt colder with the thermometer at twenty-five than he had felt out in the dry atmosphere and clear sunlight of the Western mountains when the thermometer was twenty or thirty degrees lower."

"I have heard Mr. Atherton say that," said Mortimer thoughtfully. "But how did you manage about the money?"

"It used about all I had to spare," replied his mother; "but I made Mrs. Brant accept the money by telling her that I had meant to send Jack to the Harriton Academy; but since her husband had been drilling him in his Latin and mathematics it really was an unnecessary expense. That made her feel better, and Mr. Brant has now respectable clothing to keep him warm. I think too that her son has begun to earn a little and to send to her, for she said that after a while they would have enough to be able to spend on clothes; but it would never have done to wait for that. Mr. Brant was positively staying indoors to keep warm, and Doctor Scott told me when he first came that plenty of fresh air and exercise were the things that he needed to set him all right again."

"I'll give you all that I have," said Mortimer, looking at her with a glow in his face and a steady light in his eyes that made him look handsome to his mother's gaze. We have no sacrifices to make like that, for we always have home and clothes and all that."

"No, no, dear; I did not mean to take your earnings," said his mother. "I can manage ; and now that you have to pay your board, you need all that you can earn."

"I ought to have a rise in salary soon," said Mortimer thoughtfully. "Mr. Palmer as good as promised it to me last December, and Mr. Davenant spoke very approvingly of me last week ; at least so Johnson, our bookkeeper, told me."

"You and Bertha are doing very well, as you are practically supporting yourselves now ; so do not worry about the expenses," said Mrs. Winstead, falling into the mistake so natural to a mother, of thinking that her children are to be looked upon as creatures who are dependent upon her and who are doing really a little more than their share if they support themselves.

Love and pride are apt to get confused ; and as Mrs. Winstead looked at her son with a glow of love and pride that he should so quickly make this offer, she also felt a sensitive pride on her own account that would have made it very repugnant to her to take his earnings for the family expenses. She forgot that a good impulse that leads to no good action is waste of energy and also loss of energy in that direction. Mortimer was not yet the sort of lad who could be quite content to wish to be kindly and unselfish without really accomplishing anything. He felt a superabundance of energy and physical strength. He wanted to work hard and earn more ; but he did not care to think only of his own needs, and as he was not yet beginning to think of matrimony, to work for his mother and sisters was the most natural object. Failing in that, his kindly feelings were likely to take different and perhaps less wise direction.

The last day of February was a keen, bright day, and he walked to the office in very good spirits. Mr. Palmer was not there and did not come in during the whole day. In answer to Mortimer's inquiry, the bookkeeper told him that Mr. Palmer had gone with Mr. Willoughby to Chicago on business. He then paid Mortimer his monthly salary, but there was no word about any increase. The lad put his money in his pocket, and as it was then time for leaving the office, he got into his overcoat and was just putting on his hat and leaving the office when Mark Willoughby passed and waited for Mortimer to join him. He greeted Mortimer with his usual cordiality, but he seemed thoughtful and did not have his usual string of jokes and amusing comments on all he saw.

"I hear that your father has gone to Chicago with Mr. Palmer," remarked Mortimer after they had walked a short distance in very unusual silence.

"Yes ; worse luck for me," said Mark, giving himself a restless shake.

"Why ? What's the matter ?" asked Mortimer.

"Oh, nothing much, only I wanted some money ; and here at four o'clock I found out that the old gentleman was gone and of course all the banks were closed by that time, so I could not draw a cent."

"Didn't you get paid this afternoon?" asked Mortimer. "Palmer & Davenant always pay regularly the last day of the month."

"No," said Mark carelessly, "I don't draw regularly every month. Sometimes, if I am flush, I let it run, and our bookkeeper didn't happen to have the cash handy to-day. Of course he could have given me a check, but with the banks all closed that was no good."

"Don't you know anybody who would cash a check for you?" asked Mortimer.

He knew very well that Mark Willoughby was not dependent on his salary. It was no secret that Mr. Willoughby made his son a handsome allowance, and in getting him a situation the question had been more to get him in with a good firm and a chance to learn the business than to get him a big salary.

"Yes, of course," replied Mark, "I know plenty; but a fellow don't exactly like to bother people or to go running about town like a beggar. If I happened to come across Forbes or Eversley or Ames, I could get all I want and more too; but it is Saturday, as luck will have it, and they have either gone to spend Sunday somewhere or gone home early. I say Mort," he exclaimed with a sudden change of tone, "I suppose it would inconvenience you—well, never mind, I must try to get along till Monday morning."

Mrs. Winstead had been so often in trouble because of her husband's good-natured but weak tendency to lend to his friends what he needed himself, that she had most strenuously urged upon her children neither to borrow nor lend, and the remembrance of this caused a look of embarrassment to come over Mortimer's face as soon as he perceived the drift of Mark's words.

Mark was very quick to see it and to check himself; but there was a subtle ring in the last words that hurt Mortimer. There had never been a shadow of condescension in Mark's manner to him; it had been as frank as if he had been as rich and as old as Mark himself. But now in the way that Mark checked himself there was a subtle remembrance of the difference that galled Mortimer all the more because Mark immediately went on to talk in a perfectly friendly manner on other subjects. Mortimer remembered that he had been on the point of sending the money to his mother, but she said that she did not need it. Then suddenly he exclaimed while fumbling at his pocket:

"Look here; maybe I could help you out of a pinch. I was paid to-day. How much do you need?"

"My dear fellow, it is only that I promised a man yesterday, that if he would come up to the house to-night I would pay him a fifty that I owed him. But very likely you have bills of your own coming in, and I would not inconvenience you for the world," replied Mark.

"Fifty dollars!" exclaimed Mortimer. He had not expected quite as large a sum.

"Yes, the poor fellow said he was hard up, rent due or something; but I'll just tell him to wait till Monday, though I am awfully sorry to think of bringing him all the way up to our house for nothing; but it can't be helped," summed up Mark.

"Yes, it can," replied Mortimer. "I have no bills to pay to-night, and I can let you have fifty dollars; but," he added, "I shall have bills to pay next week, and I shall need it then."

"Oh, of course!" said Mark cheerfully. "But I will give you my check at once and you can cash it Monday morning."

He turned to run up the steps of one of the best hotels which they were just passing. Mortimer followed him into the reading room, and there Mark quickly wrote out a check and the fifty dollars were transferred to Mark's pocket.

"I'll say good-bye here and take this short cut home," said Mark, as they came out of the hotel again. "That unlucky man may be waiting for me. Just call on me, Mort, whenever you want a good turn done you."

He waved his hand and went off in another direction while Mortimer walked slowly on through the darkening streets. He was pleased with himself for having done a good turn to his friend and saved the poor man a disappointment; but there was a slight undercurrent of doubt. Mark's way of talking about money and debt sounded careless to Mortimer, and he did feel a little queer to come home without a cent in his pocket on the last day of the month.

His board was due at Miss Halsey's and he needed to buy some clothing for himself. Life in town was more expensive in that way than life in the country, as he discovered very quickly. Besides, he wished to keep always a margin above his expenses, so that he could help his mother or Bertha if they needed it. If it had not been for these considerations Mortimer would not have given any more thought to this loan. Mrs. Winstead had not aimed to make her children ungenerous and no one more enjoyed giving than she did ; but she wanted them to bear in mind that the best and most useful helper is the man who can stand firmly on his own feet. The kind-hearted spendthrift who slides recklessly into the bog of debt himself in his efforts to haul out his friend, is only adding to the army of foolish people. Although folly is not as injurious as vice to the man's own character, it is in many cases quite as destructive to his friends' welfare.

CHAPTER XI

AN ACCIDENT AT BRIARLEY

THE next morning as Bertha and her aunt were dressing to go to church, the door-bell rang and Miss Ann Halsey came upstairs to say that Mr. and Miss Willoughby were in the parlor.

Bertha was already dressed and she ran down at once to see them, but Miss Rachel's face clouded.

"I wish I had been ready ten minutes earlier," she said regretfully; "I did want to get Bertha to go to our own church this morning."

"Go down and tell her," suggested Miss Ann. "She is the sweetest-tempered girl to give advice to that ever I saw. She always seems to value advice from her elders, and that is more than most young people of the present day do."

"Oh, yes; but I am afraid she values it too highly to use it often," said Miss Rachel with a sigh, and even as they spoke Miss Rebecca came into the room to say that their friends wanted Bertha and Mortimer to go to church with them, and Bertha had asked her to tell Aunt Rachel.

Kate and Mark had asked Bertha and Mortimer to go with them to hear a particularly fine anthem that was to be sung at one of the finest churches in the city, but Mark had another object in view, and as they were all leaving the house he loitered a moment in getting his hat and managed to slip an envelope into Mortimer's hand, saying in a low tone:

"I'm awfully obliged to you old fellow; but I found that the old gentleman had left what I needed with Kate, so I thought that I would return you the cash and save you the trouble of cashing that check."

Mortimer took the envelope and felt that it contained a roll of bills.

"I'll get you the check," he said.

"Oh, no. Never mind till we come back," said Mark hastily. "Don't keep them waiting now."

The young ladies were already on the sidewalk and both of the young men ran down the steps and joined them.

The music was very fine, but the service was a long one, and when they came out Kate said that she must take a shorter way home. Mortimer in a whisper reminded Mark of the check.

"Oh, tear it up," replied Mark carelessly as he turned to follow his sister. Mortimer, who was extremely methodical in all business matters, could not understand Mark's carelessness and would rather have returned the check at once. However he was careful to take it with him the next morning and, meeting Mark on his way to the office, he handed it back to him with a feeling of satisfaction that his first venture in lending had certainly not lost him his money and had apparently strengthened a friendship.

But lending is very like gambling in this respect, that those who lose at first are often to be envied, as in the long run, it probably saves them from heavier losses.

One morning nearly a month after this, Mortimer met Hamilton, whom he had not seen since his mother had warned him against the man. Now they merely bowed in passing; but the sight of him recalled to the young man his reference to the Brants, and that set him thinking about what his mother might have told Mrs. Brant and wishing that he could see all the home party.

He thought it over a great deal at spare moments during the day, and it occurred to him that he and Bertha might go out to Briarley to see them. With this idea in mind he hurried back at night to Miss Halsey's, and finding Bertha busy practising in the parlor he asked:

"I say, Bertha, would you like a little trip? What would you say to running out to Briarley to-morrow and spending the night?"

"I mean to go sometime when I have a holiday," said Bertha pleasantly.

"Why not now?" urged Mortimer. "You have no idea how pleasant the Brants really are. Mother said that she would explain to them all about our connection with the name of Merrivale and I do think that you ought to go out and see them."

"I think that it will be a great mistake if mamma does that," said Bertha quickly. "People will be very pleasant to strangers who do them a kindness, but if they think themselves relatives they will take it all as a matter of course and expect more."

"I don't think that will be the way in this case," replied Mortimer. "At all events they know already that our aunt's name was Merrivale, for Jessica spoke of it when she heard that Mrs. Brant's son had that name; but Mrs. Brant only spoke of it as a curious coincidence."

"Jessica is really dreadful for saying all that comes into her head," remarked Bertha, quite good-naturedly. "But I cannot go to-morrow, for Kate Willoughby and her brother are coming in the evening to try over some songs."

She ran her fingers over the keys as she finished speaking, and began to play a song of Schubert's.

"Write a note and put them off until next evening," suggested Miss Rachel.

"Oh, no, I could not do that," replied Bertha. "Kate and I particularly arranged for to-morrow evening."

"Then why not go the day after?" asked Mortimer. "There is nothing to hinder on Wednesday."

"No, I suppose not," said Bertha carelessly, while her fingers still wandered over the keys.

Mortimer turned away impatiently and went upstairs.

"I think, Bertha, that you ought not to try to discourage your brother from going home," said Miss Rachel reprovingly. "Young men are not often so thoughtful about their mothers as Mortimer. I was very glad that he suggested going out to Briarley."

"Mortimer always was a steady fellow," replied Bertha. "There is no need to worry about him."

"Steady fellows need sympathy," remarked Miss Rachel. "I do not believe in waiting until a young man is a scamp before taking any interest in him and his wishes or doings."

"My brothers couldn't be scamps if they tried," said Bertha, with a touch of indignant pride in her tone.

Miss Rachel hoped that her well-meant hint would be taken, but nothing more was said about Briarley until the next morning, when Mortimer said at the breakfast table:

"I think that I will run out home and see them all to-night; so do not be uneasy if I don't turn up until supper time to-morrow."

"Very well," said Bertha; "give them my love and tell mamma that I am coming out some day when I have a little spare time. I will excuse you to the Willoughbys."

"I wish that I could go with you, Mortimer," said his aunt in a low tone, "but I would not like to go without Bertha."

"No," replied Mortimer, "and it is dreadfully windy this morning. March is coming in like a lion and it would blow you to pieces; but I'll tell mother that we will bring you out when the weather gets respectable."

He said good-bye and went off cheerily; but when he was walking down the street his brows puckered and he muttered to himself:

"Something is spoiling Bertha. She doesn't seem to care about home a rap. It is not all on account of the Brants either. I believe that she has some scheme in her head."

When he reached the office however, all thoughts about his own private affairs had to be put out of his mind.

Mr. Palmer had returned from Chicago and was in the reverse of a good temper. He was short with the bookkeeper, irritable with Mortimer, and roundly scolded the office boy. At last Mr. Davenant came in and the two gentlemen retired to the inner office, but Mortimer could catch parts of their conversation. He already knew that the trip to Chicago had been to try to collect what appeared to be a bad debt, and from the scraps of conversation that he overheard he learned that it had been an unsuccessful attempt.

"He offered me five hundred on the thousand," said Mr. Palmer angrily, "and I just pooh-poohed the notion."

"Better half a loaf than no bread," remarked Mr. Davenant in his quiet, pleasant voice. "If they are really bankrupt we shall gain nothing by pressing the matter." Mr. Davenant had hardly anything to do with the tangled and knotty details of the business. He had put in a large sum of money; but it was Mr. Palmer on whom the practical part of the business chiefly fell.

That gentleman now responded sharply, but Mortimer could only hear, "Rascally fellow—sharp game—don't catch me——"

Pretty soon Mr. Davenant came out and stopped at Mortimer's desk to say a word to him. He generally spoke pleasantly to all in the office, and after inquiring for Mrs. Winstead, he said :

"By the way, Mrs. Davenant meant to ask if your sister would take charge of our little girl and take her out to Briarley this evening. Ethel Palmer has a party or something of that sort and Myrtle was to go, but Mrs. Davenant has a bad cold and must not expose herself. I told her that no doubt your sister would not mind the trip to Briarley, and would take charge of Myrtle and fetch her home in the morning."

"I think that Bertha has an engagement this evening," said Mortimer; "but I am going out to see mother, and if I can be trusted I should be very glad to offer my services as escort."

"Ah well, that would be just the thing, if you don't mind the trouble," said Mr. Davenant. "What train do you take, five-thirty? That is the one that Myrtle was to go on I believe."

Mortimer assured him that five-thirty would suit him exactly, and with a kindly nod Mr. Davenant went out. Evidently Mr. Palmer had heard the conversation, for when he came through the office a few hours later he spoke of a letter that he expected by the afternoon mail and added to Mortimer :

"If it comes you can bring it with you, as I want to see it to night, and you can give it to me on the train."

Then he too left the office and Mortimer worked away till the mail came in, when Mr. Johnson handed him the desired letter. About five o'clock he betook himself to the station. Mr. Davenant was there with Myrtle, and Mortimer willingly took her under his protection.

It was, as he had predicted to his Aunt Rachel, a very blustering night, and when they reached Briarley Mortimer made his little charge wrap herself up warmly before he hurried her across the platform to the carriage that was waiting.

Mr. Palmer had gone into the station to get his mail, but as he came out he said:

"I suppose that letter did not come from Cowperthwaite & Appleby, or Johnson would have sent it."

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Mortimer flushing with annoyance at his forgetfulness, and he hastily drew out the letter and held it out to Mr. Palmer.

Before that gentleman could take it, or perhaps because he took it loosely, the wind caught the envelope and sent it whirling directly in front of the horses. There was a sudden start and a child's cry of terror. Mortimer, who was standing with his back to the carriage and a little in front of it, turned in time to see Myrtle lying on the ground and the wheels of the heavy carriage backing close upon her. Mr. Palmer had already jumped to the heads of the frightened horses and jerked them forward again; but his action would not have been prompt enough to save Myrtle if some one on the platform had not seized the child and lifted her out of danger.

"Is she hurt?" exclaimed Mortimer, not even glancing at the gentleman who had rescued her as he pressed forward to look at the child.

"I hope not. Come into the station. There, my child, you are all safe now," said a kindly, deliberate voice that Mortimer recognized immediately, and he saw by the light of the station lamps the face of Mr. Brant. Myrtle was crying a little from fright, but she was making a brave effort to control herself; and as soon as Mr. Brant had set her on her feet in the station she assured them that she was not hurt. She was very dusty, and as everybody in the station came crowding about her she looked worried and shy.

"You would better get in the carriage again," said Mr. Brant, noticing that the coachman had the horses quieted and waiting. "Don't be nervous. We will have the door closed this time."

"Oh, no, please; I would much rather walk," exclaimed Myrtle.

"All right," said Mortimer, "I'll take you. Just let me tell Mr. Palmer;" but as he turned to do so, he saw that Mr. Palmer was limping painfully.

"I say, Mortimer," he called, "lend me your arm, won't you! I have given my ankle an ugly twist."

The coachman had his hands full with keeping the horses quiet, and it was Mortimer who had partly to lift Mr. Palmer into the carriage. He was a very heavy man and evidently each movement caused him severe pain in his foot.

"Where is the child?" he asked shortly. "I thought she was safely in the carriage."

"I put her in while you were getting your mail," replied Mortimer; "but I suppose she leaned out and lost her balance when the horses started."

"Trust children to be up to some fool tricks," growled Mr. Palmer. "James tells me she is all right; but it is a wonder that she was not killed. Where is she now? I can't wait here all night with this wretched ankle," and he drew in his lips with a short whistle as he tried to move his foot.

"She was frightened and did not want to get in again. Mr. Brant, who picked her up, said that he would walk up with her. I can go with you, sir, if you like."

"Nonsense! Go and look after the child if you want to make yourself useful," replied Mr. Palmer. "Since she did not succeed in breaking a bone she is bound to catch a cold in this wind, I suppose."

Mortimer saw too plainly how much he was suffering to resent his surly tone, and he knew that Myrtle really owed her escape as much to Mr. Palmer's prompt action as to Mr. Brant's assistance. He ran quickly after the retreating figures of Mr. Brant and the little girl, and proved himself a valuable assistant to them in facing the keen, strong blasts.

CHAPTER XII

MORTIMER'S NOTE TO MARK

"THAT little girl is a very attractive child," said Mr. Brant as he and Mortimer went down the hill after leaving Myrtle at Mr. Palmer's. "Is she related to Mr. Palmer's family?"

"She is the daughter of his partner," replied Mortimer. "I don't think that there is any relationship between the families. At least I never heard of any."

"Ah, then her name is Davenant," said Mr. Brant thoughtfully. "I have no recollection of that name."

Mortimer did not see why Mr. Brant should have any recollection of the name, but as the wind was a great hindrance to conversation and they were nearly at their own door he said nothing more about the matter.

The accident was mentioned at the supper table and when Mortimer described Mr. Brant's share in rescuing Myrtle from her perilous position, Mrs. Winstead exclaimed;

"You have made a good friend, Mr. Brant, for I know Mrs. Davenant is wrapped up in this child. She has lost three children; two died when only a few months old and the third, a fine little boy of three or four, was killed by an accident. The horse ran away, and he was thrown from the carriage. It happened seven or eight years ago, I believe, before I met her at all; but you can see how she will be likely to feel about Myrtle's escape now."

"I think that this accident should be spoken of as lightly as possible to her," said Mr. Brant, with more decision than Mrs. Winstead had heard him use before. "It would be better if the matter could be dropped entirely; but of course the little girl will talk of it and she should not be advised to keep any secrets from her mother. You, Mortimer, need not mention my name."

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Winstead, "I see no reason why you should feel like that. I think that Mrs. Davenant would rather know all about it, and I have always heard that she was remarkable for her tact. You need not be afraid that she will burden you with demonstrations of gratitude."

Mr. Brant smiled too, but held to his own opinion.

"Now you are real foolish," began his wife briskly; for she had heard enough of Mortimer's employers to be sure that the Davenants were wealthy and influential. While she had too much sturdy independence to wish to form acquaintance with any one for the sake of riches or influence, she was shrewd enough to appreciate the advantages that fell in her way unsought. But her husband only replied:

"I think, my dear, that I can in this matter form a more unbiased judgment than can you or my kind friends; and I greatly prefer that my name should not be mentioned. I advise you, Mortimer, not to dwell any more than proves unavoidable upon the risk incurred by the child."

He spoke very quietly, but so decidedly that his wife made no further objection, and nothing more was said on the subject.

The next morning Mortimer received a message from Mr. Palmer asking him to come to the house before going to town. He found that Mr. Palmer's ankle was so badly sprained that it would keep him from the office, and Mortimer had to take several messages from him, and also escort Myrtle back to town. When they reached her home he did not see Mrs. Davenant and had to hurry on to the office with as little delay as possible. Before he reached it he was hailed by Mark Willoughby and they were on sufficiently intimate terms for Mark to begin this time with very little preface to ask him for a loan.

"I am sorry to bother you," said Mark; "but the fact is that the old gentleman has come back so crabbed on account of the failure of some Chicago firm, that I would not dare to strike him for a two-cent stamp to-day."

As Mortimer was able to accommodate his friend he did not like to refuse and he promised to let him have what he needed as soon as he got out of the office. Mark was profuse in his thanks and then added:

"If you want to do a little stroke of business on your own account, I can put you up to a good thing. I know a fellow who is a sort of right-hand man to one of those big mine owners out in Colorado. He has come East on business for his employers, and he let me into a thing or two that would double a couple of hundreds for me pretty quick. In fact I would like to put more into it if I had it."

"What is it?" asked Mortimer. "I have no great faith in these mining affairs."

"Nor have I," replied Mark, "when it is all a 'pig in a poke' business. But this man appears to know what he is talking about, and he has evidently taken a great fancy to me. His name is Hamilton."

"Then don't have a thing to do with him or his business," said Mortimer decidedly. "I know he is a rascal, and I am pretty sure that his business is a fraud."

"Do you know him?" asked Mark.

"No, not exactly; but I have seen him and I know about him," said Mortimer. "I hope you have not put any money in his hands."

"Oh, no," replied Mark carelessly; "and I'll fight shy of him if he is the sort you say."

"I wish you would," said Mortimer, and then they parted at the door of Palmer & Davenant's office.

Mortimer liked Mark much too well to relish the idea of his falling a prey to the rogues that watch for rich men's sons, and the thought that Hamilton was setting traps for him troubled him all that day. He left the office as early as he could to meet Mark, as he had promised to do, and hand him the money that he intended to loan him. Mark was waiting for him as he came out of Miss Halsey's with the money, but was evidently in a great hurry, so Mortimer had only a chance to slip in another word of warning against Hamilton.

"All right, old fellow," said Mark, "I shall not forget, and I'll keep a sharp watch on the man."

"You would better let him alone altogether," said Mortimer bluntly. "I don't see any fun in watching a rogue unless by ill luck he happens to have one's money in his pocket; and you say he has not got yours."

"You are right," said Mark; "and you are an out and out good fellow to help me this time. I'll mind your warning, and I'll bring this money back to you in a day or two. The governor will get settled down then, and I can draw on him again."

Mortimer did not like the easy way in which Mark spoke, but he could do nothing more.

Mr. Palmer's absence from the office upset the usual routine, and as the bookkeeper also was kept at home with a severe attack of rheumatism, Mortimer's office work was particularly heavy. He had not seen Mark for several days, and he was feeling depressed and rather cross over the business that he had to attend to as he left his desk one evening in the latter part of the week. Mr. Davenant had just gone out and Mortimer had one arm half-way into the sleeve of his overcoat when Mark appeared at the office door. He looked pale and rather worn, but he spoke cheerily as he came in and helped Mortimer to put on his coat.

"Any word of that rise in salary?" he asked.

"No, not a word," growled Mortimer.

"Never mind, don't look so glum. You are not half so badly off as I am at this moment. You will get what is due you to-morrow, and I shall not get a cent."

"What is the matter?" asked Mortimer anxiously.

They were by this time out in the street. The weather had grown milder and the snow was thawing. The street lamps that had just been lighted were reflected in black puddles at every crossing, and the raw air felt colder than on the clear frosty nights of the earlier part of the month.

"There is a good deal the matter," said Mark wearily. "First, I am out of Harvey & Blake's. There wasn't any complaint; they just said they were cutting down forces and didn't need me any more; but it has made a tremendous row at home. My father is just about as mad as he gets, and that is nothing small, let me tell you."

"But he can't blame you, surely," said Mortimer.

"Oh, can't he, though?" said Mark with a short laugh. "If you had been behind the door last night, you would have changed your mind on that point pretty quickly. He says that I must have been lazy and shiftless or they would have shipped off somebody else and kept me. Why, I was the youngest in the place, and therefore I was sure to go if they began cutting down; but he won't listen to reason. The fact is that those Chicago people have not settled up; and that I suppose is at the bottom of all the row."

"I'm sorry Mr. Willoughby looks at it in that way," said Mortimer. "But after all it won't hurt you, Mark. You are not like me. You can afford to wait for another chance and maybe you will do better next time."

"That's just where you are out," replied Mark irritably; "I can't afford to wait; there is a fellow dunning me for money on a note that I gave him a month ago, and as I can't pay it he says that he'll go to my father. Of course if he goes while the old gentleman is in his present state of mind, my goose is cooked. The fellow may get his money, but I shall certainly be fired out."

"Can't you get him to wait?" asked Mortimer, who could hardly understand how the son of the rich Mr. Willoughby could be so frequently hard pressed for money. "I should think that he would be willing to have the note renewed if you could give him a part in cash."

"Yes, I could do that," replied Mark; "but you see he wants the note endorsed." Then suddenly he said: "I say, old man, maybe you would not mind endorsing for me?"

"How much is it for?" asked Mortimer, too much surprised by the request to have any definite reply ready.

"A hundred and fifty," replied Mark.

"Oh, I could not possibly do that; it would take a whole quarter's salary to pay it," exclaimed Mortimer.

"Of course you would not have to pay it," said Mark testily; "only to endorse so that I could have a chance to get on my feet again."

Mortimer shook his head. He might be led into foolish lending to oblige his friend, but endorsing a note when he had not the money to meet it, and when he knew that his friend had not the money, was to his straightforward mind too much like lying. Still he hated to seem churlish and unsympathetic and he answered evasively:

"Who is the man? I don't believe that he would take my endorsement."

"Don't worry about that. He will take it fast enough," replied Mark, neglecting the first part of the query. "He knows that you have a good situation. If I had not had the wretched luck to lose mine just when I did, he would have taken my personal note without bothering for endorsement."

"If I had gotten that increase in salary I might do something," began Mortimer hesitatingly. "But fifty a month seems very little when one lives in town, and Mr. Palmer seems to have forgotten all about that little matter."

Mortimer stopped short, for a portly gentleman leaning heavily on a cane passed close by them and signalled a street car that was just coming up to the corner. Under the light of the street lamp Mortimer recognized Mr. Palmer, and he was sure that the gentleman turned his head and cast a keen glance back at the two young men as he painfully mounted the step of the car.

"I did not know that he was able to come to town; he was not at the office. I wonder whether he heard," muttered Mortimer, feeling uncomfortably conscious that in his annoyance he had been speaking in a cross tone that he never before had used in speaking of his employers.

"Small harm if he did. Maybe it will jog his memory," carelessly answered Mark, who had also recognized his uncle. "But come now, we are almost at your boarding house, and you will do me this good turn, won't you?"

"No, I can't; it would not be honest," replied Mortimer sturdily. "But why not try if the man will wait a bit for part of the cash down. I might help you in that way. Who is he?"

"You don't know him," said Mark evasively. "I've no doubt that he would jump at seventy-five in cash and call it square; but I don't want your money."

"And I have not got seventy-five to spare," returned Mortimer shortly, "and I won't endorse. I would not do it for my own brother if I had not the money to pay, so I don't see any use in talking any more about the matter."

They had just reached Miss Halsey's and Mortimer said a short good-night and sprang up the steps feeling very cross and irritated. But his irritation was entirely caused by vexation that he could not help his friend, although it hurt him that Mark should come to him with such requests. When he reached his room he pulled out a little memorandum of various small sums that he had loaned Mark at different times and tried hard to pursuade himself that he was indignant with his friend; but in spite of his firm conviction that Mark had no right to come to a young man who was no better off than he was to borrow money, Mortimer had too much of his father's easy, kindly nature not to be ready to see excuses, and he felt very uncomfortable as he thought of Mark going home with the idea that he, Mortimer, was a stingy fellow, and only a fair-weather friend. If it had not been for the rigid ideas of strict honesty that his mother had drilled into him, Mortimer would have been as easily led into grave entanglements as his father had been.

"I have a great mind to lend him what I have coming to me this month," he thought with an impatient shake. "Mother doesn't need it, she says, and I'm sure Bertha is earning all that she needs. I do hate to seem stingy and I'm sure if I were a Vanderbilt I would be one of the most generous fellows living. I do wish that I knew what I ought to do."

With this final worried desire Mortimer ran downstairs to tea. He was already beginning to forget the one Friend who is never out of reach when troubles and perplexities assail us, and thus he sought no answer to his query save in his own perplexed mind. Miss Clive had slipped into the mistake that the people sometimes make of giving all her thought and attention to the wayward one, forgetful of the fact that dangers and temptations will come before trusty and sensible people as well as before the giddy ones, and the wisest often need a little kindly watchcare. Thus while Bertha was very rarely out of her thoughts, it never occurred to her to try to win the confidence of the quiet, steady Mortimer, as his mother had always taken pains to do.

The next morning he set off to the office still in an uncomfortable frame of mind. He expected to see Mr. Palmer that morning, and he had a lurking hope that there might be something said about the rise in salary He was surprised to find no one there, not even the office boy, although the office was open and even the door of Mr. Palmer's private office stood ajar.

However he had too much to do to waste time, as he knew that the bookkeeper was still laid up. In a few moments the office boy appeared and Mortimer asked him rather sharply where he had been.

"I just ran out to post a letter for a gentleman who came in a bit ago," said the boy. "Mr. Davenant came about half an hour ago, but he went out again and told me to say to you when you come, as Mr. Palmer was still laid up, but he'd be back himself in half an hour."

"Who was the gentleman?" asked Mortimer.

"He didn't give no name," replied the boy. "He just asked for Mr. Palmer, and when I told him Mr. Davenant would be in soon he sat down. Then he saw the postman taking the letters out of the box at the corner over there, and he jumped up in a hurry and pulled a letter out of his pocket and said as how he had forgot to mail it, and it was important, and would I run after the postman with it."

"Well, there was nobody here when I came in a minute ago," said Mortimer sharply; "and you had no business to go off and leave the office like that."

As he spoke Mr. Davenant returned.

"Ah, good morning, Winstead," he said in his cheery way as he passed Mortimer's desk. "Extra work for both of us still, as I hear Johnson can't be out for several days yet; and Mr. Palmer tried to come to town yesterday but he was little too quick at getting about I suppose, for he telegraphed me this morning that he could not get in to-day. Nobody been in this morning? I was expecting—oh, good morning, Mr. Appleby," and he turned to greet a gentleman who at that moment came in.

Mortimer recognized him as a member of the bankrupt Chicago firm, and as Mr. Davenant took him into the inner room and closed the door Mortimer turned again to his work, thinking that if it had been Mr. Palmer he would not have risked being out when he expected a man to pay him money. But Mr. Davenant was totally different from Mr. Palmer, and one could never tell how early or how late he might come to the office, nor when he would go out.

After a little while the door of the inner office opened again and Mr. Davenant and Mr. Appleby came out. Mr. Davenant had some coins in his left hand, and Mortimer noticed that as he talked he drew out of his pocket the safe key and negligently rapped it on the coins that lay in the palm of his other hand. Suddenly the key slipped from his fingers and fell to his feet just as Mr. Appleby held out his hand to say good-bye. Mr. Davenant seeing the outstretched hand checked himself as he was stooping for the key and shook hands, while Mortimer, noticing the slight embarrassment, sprang from his stool, picked up the key and restored it to him.

"Did you drop anything else, sir?" asked Mortimer, who thought that he had heard the ring of something else on the floor.

"Ah, thank you, Winstead. No, no, that was all," said Mr. Davenant hastily, as he thrust the key back in his pocket. Then he walked with Mr. Appleby to the door, and Mortimer gave a quick glance around, but there was nothing to be seen on the floor. He then retreated to his desk, making no further search, for Mr. Davenant, with all his kindly, friendly manner, had also a little nervous irritability about him if any small thing happened to embarrass him, which was a marked contrast to the cool, imperturbable self-control that was never known to desert Mr. Palmer in the office.

"If he really dropped any money, he will find it out when he counts it over after Mr. Appleby is gone," thought Mortimer; "I won't bother him by looking about more carefully now."

As the door closed behind Mr. Appleby, Mr. Davenant turned to Mortimer and said cheerfully:

"Well, that is not such a bad beginning for the day's work. I don't have half as much to do with the business as Mr. Palmer, but here I have just made a haul that is one-half better than he expected to make. Come in here, my boy, I need you."

He went back to the inner room and Mortimer following him saw him clap down the coins that he had in his hand upon a pile of bank notes that lay on the desk, and then for the first time the young man saw that they were gold coins.

"There," said Mr. Davenant, "I've just settled for seven hundred and fifty that debt on which Mr. Palmer thought that we should do well if we got five hundred ; and in fact I believe that he was beginning to despair of getting even that. Now what I want is to get hold of Mr. Willoughby. Do you think you could run up to his house with a note and get back in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," replied Mortimer.

"Very well, sit down there while I write," said Mr. Davenant.

He moved the money to a little slide that was drawn out above the side drawer of the desk, and Mortimer sat down on a chair that stood close beside it. A slight noise, as of some one moving in the next room, made Mortimer turn and look behind him toward the communicating door between the two offices; but the door of a closet in which Mr. Palmer usually hung his coat and hat stood partly open, and prevented him from seeing either the entrance door of the outer office or his own desk.

Mr. Davenant had his back turned and was taking a sheet of paper from a drawer on the other side of the desk.

"I think, sir, that somebody came in. Shall I go and see?" asked Mortimer, and as he spoke there was an unmistakable sound of the outer door closing and footsteps in the next room.

"Yes," said Mr. Davenant, "but don't let me be disturbed till I have finished my note."

Mortimer rose and crossed the office, pausing a moment before he went out to close the closet door that was close beside the door of communication. Even in this little matter he noted the contrast between the two partners. Mr. Palmer was always methodical and exact. No left-open doors nor loose papers were to be found in the room when he occupied it, and his eyes seemed to see everything, and to fasten upon any carelessness of those in his employ. Mr. Davenant, although he had evidently opened the closet door, had not taken the trouble to hang up his coat and hat, for Mortimer noticed that they were lying on a chair. He did not disturb them but went into the outer office, where to his surprise he beheld, perched on the stool before his own desk, his brother Jack.

"Hello! how did you get here? What's up?" exclaimed Mortimer.

"Nothing particular," replied Jack, "only I tore my coat out sledding and mother told me to come in and see if you could go with me to get another."

"You little mischief," grumbled Mortimer. "What do you mean by tearing your overcoat so near the end of the winter? you will outgrow a new one before next winter."

"The old thing is pretty shabby and it's an awful tear. I can't wear that to church," said Jack, turning to display the carefully mended rent. "If you'll tell me how soon you can stop for me I'll run up to Miss Halsey's. I can see Bertha and wait for you there."

"Stop a moment," said Mortimer, "I have to go out with a message now——" but as he spoke Mr. Davenant came into the room with a letter in his hand.

"Your brother, Winstead?" he asked. "Hum, how do you do, my boy? What's wrong with that coat of yours?" For Jack's boyish treble had been clearly audible in the next room, though Mortimer had toned his replies lower. "Well, well." Mr. Davenant continued, laughing as he surveyed the rent, "that reminds me of my sledding days. But see here, Mortimer, if your brother is as bright a lad as he looks I've no doubt that he could carry this note and save your time. What do you say, Jack—that's your name isn't it? Do you know the way to Mr. Willoughby's?"

"Oh, yes, sir," exclaimed Jack, highly pleased.

"Very well," said Mr. Davenant briskly, "our office boy would take all day and I see that he is as usual out of the way; but I'll bet that you will be back in less than fifteen minutes. Bring me an answer if he's in; and if he is not in, just ask where he is and bring me word."

"I'll do it, sir, if Mr. Willoughby don't keep me waiting," said Jack confidently. Meanwhile Mortimer was hastily fumbling in his pocket. He pulled out a pencil and as he did so a bunch of keys and one or two pennies rolled on the floor. Jack scrambled for them while Mr. Davenant was sealing the envelope of his letter and at the same time Mortimer scribbled hastily on a blank page of paper,

I can fix it. Come to me this evening and I can let you have the money. M. W.
March 31, 1880.

He thrust this into an envelope and directed it to Mr. Mark Willoughby. Mr. Davenant had handed his note to Jack and was leaving the room. Jack also had turned toward the street door, but Mortimer sprang after him and shoved the envelope into his hand saying in a low tone,

"You know him. Give this to him if you see him or else leave it for him; it won't delay you a minute."

Jack was off like a shot and Mortimer heaved a sigh of relief. He had felt worried ever since he had refused to help Mark, and when Mr. Davenant spoke of sending him to Mr. Willoughby's his first thought was that he would probably have a chance to see Mark or leave word for him. Mr. Davenant's sudden change of plan in sending Jack disconcerted him, and he had to think and act quickly if he meant to do anything. He knew very well that Mr. Palmer would have been extremely indignant that a messenger of his should be encumbered with any other person's message, but he justified himself by thinking that Mr. Davenant was not so unnecessarily strict. At a call from the next room he hurried in with flushed face and quick-beating heart, almost expecting a reprimand, though he had tried to speak too low to be overheard.

His fears were quickly set at rest for Mr. Davenant only said: "Your salary is due to-day, Winstead. Do you usually get cash or check?"

"Usually cash," replied Mortimer, who had his own reasons for wishing cash to-day.

"All right," said Mr. Davenant, handing him a fifty-dollar note from the pile on the desk.

Mortimer thanked him and put his hand in his pocket to get his pocketbook. As he did so he missed his keys.

"That scamp Jack must have carried them off," he thought. "But luckily they were all my own private keys, there were none of the office keys among them."

As he returned to his desk he was figuring up in his mind how much he could let Mark have.

In less than fifteen minutes Jack returned red and breathless. He had Mr. Davenant's letter in his hand.

"Mr. Willoughby has gone out to Mr. Palmer's, sir; so I did not leave this but I can take it there when I go home if you will let me," he said eagerly.

Mr. Davenant puckered his brows and thought for a moment, then took the letter from Jack's hand and said:

"See here, Winstead, I shall have to get you to attend to this business. Sit down there, Jack, and wait a minute."

Jack betook himself to his old perch at Mortimer's desk, and Mr. Davenant, taking a strong envelope from a drawer, proceeded to put into it the pile of money that was still lying on the slide of his desk.

"There," he said. "It is important that Mr. Palmer should have this money to-day and I can't go, as there is a man coming here to see me, whom I must not miss."

"Maybe that is the one who called this morning before you came in," said Mortimer.

"Whew, that is unlucky! Why didn't he wait?" exclaimed Mr. Davenant. "I would not have missed Callender for a good deal."

"I don't know that it was Mr. Callender. I did not see him, for he had gone when I came in," replied Mortimer. "The office boy told me."

"Where is the young rascal?" said Mr. Davenant irritably; "he is more trouble than he's worth," and he rose and pushed back a sliding window in the wall that gave a view of the outer office. "Hello, there he is. Tom, who was that came here to see me this morning?"

Mortimer knew very well that Tom had been taking advantage of Mr. Palmer's absence to loaf; so he was not surprised that the boy stammered and flushed when the usually easy-going Mr. Davenant spoke to him so sharply; and feeling sorry that he had got the boy into a scrape he said kindly:

"You remember that gentleman who came in before I did; was he Mr. Callender?"

"Oh, no," replied Tom quickly. "I've seen Mr. Callender often; I'd know him."

"Well, who was it?" asked Mr. Davenant sharply.

"He didn't give his name, sir," said the boy, "but he —he came in again a bit after you did, didn't he?"

"Oh, it was Mr. Appleby, was it? He did not tell me that he had been here twice. Well, it would have been unlucky if I had missed him," said Mr. Davenant, his usual serenity returning as he recalled the seven hundred and fifty dollars. "Now, Winstead, I want you to take Mr. Palmer this package. There is seven hundred dollars in it and you tell him—no, wait. I'll write all that and you get your work ahead so that you can take the one o'clock train. See here, give this to Tom to deliver and tell him to do no loitering on the way."

He had walked back to his desk and now he handed Mortimer a letter and seated himself to write to Mr. Palmer. Mortimer sent off Tom with a friendly warning, and returned to his own desk, unceremoniously displacing Jack, who then amused himself by trying to look out of the window, which was covered with a pattern in ground glass. For a time nothing was heard but the monotonous scratching of pens. Jack was beginning to get very tired when at last Mr. Davenant came out with his hat and coat on.

"I am going to get a bite of lunch," he said; "for I shall not leave the office while you are gone, Winstead. If Mr. Callender comes in, just tell him that I will return in a moment." He locked the door of the inner office as he spoke and put the key in his pocket. Then as he passed Jack he drew out a bright new quarter and gave it to him, saying: "You are a brisk messenger, Jack; I would like to get hold of you every time I want a message given promptly." Then he went out.

Mortimer glanced up from his writing for a moment and noticed that Mr. Davenant had not closed the wooden slide in the wall. Through the aperture he could see the envelope containing the money, lying, apparently sealed and directed, on the desk, and he also noticed that the safe was closed. Then he turned to Jack and asked:

"Did you leave my note?"

"Yes," replied the boy. "I saw Mr. Mark Willoughby himself and gave it to him. I was brisk too, for——"

"See here," said Mortimer interrupting him, "I don't think that I can attend to your coat to-day; you must just go to Miss Halsey's and find out if Bertha can't go with you. But wait; hand over my keys first."

"Here they are," said Jack. "You shoved me off so fast I forgot to hand them to you; and there were a couple of pennies too," he added, feeling in his pocket after he had given Mortimer the keys.

"Never mind the pennies; you can keep them," said his brother. "Now be off, for I'm very busy."

Jack still lingered, looking dissatisfied.

"I don't want to go with a girl to buy a coat," he blurted out. "I wouldn't mind mother, but Bertha ——" he made such a wry face that Mortimer had to laugh.

"Well, I'll see what I can do. Just run across to that place at the corner and get some sandwiches—I always get my lunch there—and I'll come as soon as Mr. Davenant returns."

Jack went, nothing loth, for he had been thinking about something to eat while he was idly peering out of the window. Mortimer worked away busily, and by the time Mr. Davenant came back was ready to receive the package and letter and then hurried across to the restaurant where Jack was waiting for him. The boy had finished his sandwiches and Mortimer found that by letting his own lunch go, he would have just time to attend to the matter of the coat before the departure of the one o'clock train. The two brothers set off at a smart pace for the tailor's, where they quickly dispatched their business just in time to take the train for Briarley.

CHAPTER XIII

BERTHA AS ADVISER

MYRTLE'S accident had not been entirely without ill consequences to herself. The shock and the fright had made her very nervous, and a cold that she had taken from her walk in the keen wind added to her feverish excitement and served to alarm Mrs. Davenant very thoroughly. In spite of assurances from the old family doctor that the child would be all right in a day or two, she stopped all Myrtle's lessons and devoted her own time to nursing her. Myrtle found this very delightful and she gave her mother many glowing descriptions of the kind old gentleman who had lifted her out of the way of the carriage wheels.

Bertha, meanwhile, did not see her little pupil for several days, and Miss Clive took the opportunity to urge her to use the free days to go out to Briarley. Bertha did not refuse outright, but she always spoke of "to-morrow." One evening she had to play at a birthday party given for one of her little pupils, and when that was over she had an engagement with Kate Willoughby. Mortimer was not wrong when he thought that Bertha had something on her mind. She had noticed lately that Kate seemed worried and her usual good spirits seemed rather strained. Bertha was very hopeful that Kate would make a *confidante* of her. While she did not mean actually to disobey her mother, Bertha was beginning to feel, as young people are very apt to feel when they first leave the close shelter of home, that she could see a little farther and judge a little better than her mother could. She soon discovered that the Davenants and the Willoughbys were looked upon by the best people in Harriton as very desirable acquaintances, and that there were girls who envied her because of Kate's friendship and Mrs. Davenant's kindly interest. Now that she was cut off for a few days from her daily intercourse with the Davenants, she was the more averse to doing anything to check the growing intimacy between Kate and herself. Miss Clive expostulated gently :

"My dear, you should not postpone your visit home; and really I think it would pain your mother very much if she knew that you were delaying your visit to her in order to spend the time with Kate Willoughby. She never seemed to desire much intimacy between you."

"Oh, auntie dear, please don't put it in that unpleasant way," said Bertha with a coaxing tone and at the same time a hurt expression on her pretty face. "There is no comparison between dear mamma and Kate; but I do think that Kate needs me just now. She was at Mrs. Harley's yesterday, for she had promised to sing for the children, and indeed she was the life of Edith's birthday party; but I know her well enough to see under all her gayety when she is anxious and worried. She whispered to me that she was in trouble and she wanted to know if I could not come to see her to-day."

Miss Clive shook her head. She had no great faith in Bertha's skill as an adviser, but the girl continued:

"You know that Kate has been very kind in helping me to get pupils, and I could not bear to have her think that I was only ready to make use of her for my own advantage and could not spare time to give her a little sympathy if she is in trouble."

"What is this trouble?" asked Miss Clive.

"I do not know," said Bertha. "She has not told me yet."

In her own mind the young girl was weaving a little romance over her friend. She had noticed Mr. Guy Atherton in attendance on Kate rather frequently of late, and she thought there might be some difficulty from a stern papa stepping in between his daughter and heiress and a young lawyer who, though clever and handsome, was not as yet a match for her in point of fortune. But all this was pure surmise, and Bertha did not care to confide the fancies to her aunt.

"Kate has several times told me," she remarked, "that she was greatly pleased by the friendship her brother has for Mortimer. She says Mortimer is so good and steady and so unlike many of the young men her brother is thrown in company with, that she always feels comfortable and easy when she knows that he is with Mortimer. Don't you think, auntie, that mamma would be pleased with that? She is always anxious that we should be helpful to our friends."

"That is true, dear child," said her aunt kindly; "but in order to give real assistance to others we must be careful to get all the help that we need ourselves. Are you taking care that Bertha keeps in close enough connection with her Lord, to be ready to point others to him? for that, as I have always found, is the only true way out of difficulties and troubles."

Bertha flushed deeply and hesitated, and in that moment Miss Halsey entered the room and their conversation was interrupted.

Her aunt's speeches, as Bertha called them, had the power to disconcert her, but they had not the power to shake her confidence in Bertha Winstead, and as she dressed and hurried away to Mr. Willoughby's she quickly regained her composure. The eager and affectionate greeting that she received from Kate completely established her faith in her own kindness and wisdom.

"I am so glad to see you!" exclaimed Kate, seizing her hands and drawing her down beside her on a low divan. "I have been dreadfully worried, and I had nobody to consult or to talk with, for Mrs. Hughes is not the one in whom I can confide when it comes to family matters. But I knew that I could trust you."

"Certainly, dear," said Bertha gently. "I shall be glad to help you if I can."

While they were talking Kate had carefully closed the door, so that they were safe from intrusion, and now she returned to her place beside Bertha and began feverishly.

"It is the old story that you have heard me harp upon before. Yes, it is about Mark, as no doubt you have guessed."

Bertha had not guessed anything of the sort. Her little romance crumbled away and it must be confessed that she felt rather disappointed, but she took good care to show no signs of this and hastened to reply:

"He is so fond of you and so kind-hearted that I am sure he would not do anything to vex you."

"Ah, but that is just where the danger comes in," sighed Kate. "He is kind and bright and attractive, and with it all he has nobody to take any special interest in him. You, who have your mother to go to, can't understand quite how forlorn we are; and really, I can hardly blame him if he does get acquainted with people whom papa does not like. But of course a young man falls in with many kinds of people. About a year ago he got acquainted with a young man who was not very steady. He began to borrow of Mark and finally papa found it out and forbade Mark to bring him to the house any more. The young man was not really bad, I believe, and he was lively and amusing, and Mark thought that papa was too harsh. In fact it made unpleasant feelings between papa and Mark which I could do nothing to prevent."

Bertha recalled with a sudden flash that Mrs. Palmer had spoken to her mother of a young man who was trying to win Kate and her fortune, and she understood without any further explanations.

"Papa was irritated," went on Kate, "and he was impatient with Mark, and then Mark got in the way of going out to see his friends instead of bringing them to the house. That is so bad," she said, with a sadly wise shake of her pretty head; "for then you have absolutely no knowledge of what is going on. I know that Mark got into the way of spending a good deal more than his salary and his allowance. I was terribly vexed when I found that he had borrowed of your brother."

"Of Mortimer?" exclaimed Bertha.

"Yes, I supposed that you knew of it."

"No, indeed, I did not," replied Bertha in a piqued tone.

"Oh, well, very likely he had no time to tell you," said Kate hastily; "for I discovered what he had done and as I happened to have the sum, I made him repay it the next day. Papa never knew of it, and perhaps your brother forgot all about it. Well, now there is some other trouble, I am sure, though I cannot make out exactly what is the matter. A man has been here a few times inquiring for Mark, and I do dislike his looks most heartily. If Mark is mixed up in any transactions with him I am sure that it will make papa terribly angry; he does hate anything underhanded."

"Have you asked your brother about this man?" inquired Bertha.

"Yes," replied Kate despondently; "but he always puts me off. And now," she went on hurriedly, "there is another thing to worry me. Last summer we met a family at the seashore; they were very rich, but that was all there was to say about them except that the daughter was a pretty girl. There is no denying that she was very pretty and dressed very handsomely; but, my dear, the style! She was positively vulgar; loud talk, loud laughing, silly jokes, and the most barefaced manner of positively obliging young men to pay attention to her. Of course with her good looks and her money—for she was the only child—young men were not slow to run after her; but she did not discriminate a bit. The silliest young nobody would do if she wanted to be amused. Now mind, I don't mean that there was really any harm in the girl; but you may imagine how I felt to see Mark dragged off to make himself agreeable to her. I was never so anxious to get away from a place in all my life."

Bertha became more interested now, and laying her hand affectionately on Kate's she said:

"That must have been dreadfully worrying while you were there; but do the people live in Harriton?"

"No," replied Kate; "and as soon as we came away I thought no more about them; but I have just heard that they are in town now, and I am very much afraid that the girl will make an attempt to renew the acquaintance. I can get rid of her easily enough, but I am afraid that Mark may be drawn into going about with her, and if she carries on as she did at the seashore, people will be sure to talk."

"I should not think that she would be the kind of girl to attract your brother," said Bertha a little coldly.

"Oh, no, she is not in the least attractive," said Kate eagerly. "But a young man cannot be rude, you know; and I thought that if I could get up something to interest Mark particularly at home, so that he would not be out so many evenings, it would keep him out of her way."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Bertha musingly. "What was your idea?"

"I thought of some musical evenings. You know how fond Mark is of music," said Kate; "and if I can get the people I want to help me, I am sure that it would be a success. I thought of you first of all, and then I wanted you to consult with and advise me."

"It is a capital idea," exclaimed Bertha warmly. "Of course we could make it a succcess. We could have some lovely music; and then what fine training it would be too."

"I thought Herr Lubeck would help; and then there is Mr. Scott, the first violin of the Concordia Club," said Kate counting on her fingers.

"Yes, indeed; and we could get Grace Marsden and Jennie Hatfield and others of Herr Lubeck's best pupils," interrupted Bertha. "It will be delightful. I am so glad that you thought of it."

"Ah, if only Mark will think the same," said Kate, whose love of music was evidently overshadowed now by her love and anxiety for her brother. "This is the very thing that I cannot do without your help. You see I have talked so much to him about staying at home more in the evenings, that I am afraid he will only think of it as a plan to catch him if I should suggest this; but if you were to suggest it to him he would be all right. It would be quite natural that I should want to have the evenings here, for Miss Halsey's parlor is not big enough." She looked at Bertha anxiously as she spoke, but Bertha answered readily:

"That is easy enough, if I happen to meet your brother."

"He may have come in now," exclaimed Kate, eager to clinch the matter. "Come down with me to the parlor. I want to show you some new music that I got to-day and he may be there."

The parlor was empty as the two girls entered it, but Kate's fine piano stood open, and it was strewed with new songs which soon absorbed Bertha's attention.

"Oh, Kate, what a lovely home you have!" she exclaimed with a sigh of envy as she let her eyes wander over the handsomely furnished room.

At one end the glass doors of a small conservatory revealed a glimpse of tropical greenery through which gleamed the brilliant hues of flowers that made one forget the icy, wind-swept streets outside and fancy one's self in the depth of summer. There were fine paintings on the walls, numerous dainty little artistic knick-knacks covered the tables and mantel shelves, while just behind the grand piano beside which they were standing, rich *portières* shut off another room that Bertha knew was stored with a fine collection of books.

"If I had a home like this I should never want to leave it," she asserted.

"You have what is far better," exclaimed Kate. "You have no idea how I envy you your home with your sweet, refined mother and your sisters and brothers. What good can books and pictures do when one has to be thrown in with coarse and vulgar or inane people? But you know nothing about that worry."

"Indeed, I do know more about it than you think," said Bertha resentfully. "It was just to avoid people of that class that I came to Harriton."

Kate, who had spoken rather bitterly, now opened her eyes in sheer surprise.

"I always thought your Briarley friends were unusually pleasant and nice," she said; "and Uncle Palmer always quotes your mother as an instance of what a refined gentlewoman can do in training up her children like herself."

Bertha saw the blunder that she had made in betraying feelings to which Kate had no clue, and she was obliged now to make some sort of explanation.

"I mean," she said quickly, "that mamma has visitors at home that I don't care about. Some Western people, a Mr. and Mrs. Brant."

"Oh, I remember," said Kate, "that I heard they were expected. I had no idea that you had found them so disagreeable and I did not know that they were still there."

"Yes, they are still there," replied Bertha pettishly. "I came away because I knew very well what they would be like; but I suppose that I shall have to meet them now, for they seem to have taken up their abode there. If I want to see mamma I must put up with them. If they had any refinement of feeling they would have gone before this."

At that moment the entrance of a servant interrupted any reply that Kate might have made.

"Mr. Hamilton, miss, to see Mr. Mark."

"Not at home," said Kate hastily. "You know that, Jane."

"Yes, miss, but the gentleman said he came by appointment, so I showed him into the library," replied the maid.

Kate turned with a gesture of impatience, and drawing aside the *portière* she entered the dimly lighted library. Bertha heard her clear voice saying coldly:

"My brother is not at home and I do not think that he will be in this evening. Will you leave any message?"

Bertha could not catch the low reply, but evidently the gentleman was leaving and Jane vanished rapidly to show him out.

"That detestable man!" exclaimed Kate, as she re-entered the parlor. "There he sat reading a paper as coolly as though the house belonged to him. I dislike him so intensely and I do wish Mark had never set eyes on him."

"Has he been in there all the time that we were talking here?" asked Bertha.

"I hope not," exclaimed Kate, but she rang the bell to make inquiries.

Jane reappeared, and on being questioned replied that she had shown the gentleman into the library and had gone upstairs in search of Miss Willoughby, as she knew that Miss Winstead had been shown up to the sitting room.

"As I didn't find you there, miss, I just knocked at your bedroom door and then came downstairs to the parlor," said the girl.

"That will do," said Kate who, though she was annoyed, had too thoroughly the instincts of a lady to relieve her feelings by scolding a servant. Then as Jane left the room she remarked: "I do not think that we mentioned Mark's name after we came into this room, so the man could not have overheard anything. If he did, I am sure that he would try to make mischief."

"Are you not growing terribly suspicious, Kate? I can assure you that we said nothing about that matter after we came downstairs; so put your mind at ease on that point."

"Perhaps I am foolish," owned Kate wearily; "but indeed I have such a repugnance to that man that I cannot bear the sight of him."

"Then don't think of him any more," replied Bertha promptly. "Let us return to our plans and our music."

And thus she dismissed the subject.

CHAPTER XIV

MISSING MONEY

WHILE Kate and Bertha were laying their plans, Mortimer had returned from his hasty trip to Briarley. He did his errand at Mr. Palmer's, and he looked in for a few moments at the farmhouse, but his appointment with Mark weighed on his mind, and as he had fixed no hour he was in haste to get back. The first person he met as he came out of the station at Harriton was Mark himself, and very warm were the young man's expressions of gratitude to Mortimer as they walked together toward Miss Halsey's.

"I can let you have the seventy-five," said Mortimer; "but I can't do any more than that."

"I hate to let you do that much," said Mark, "and I would not take a cent of it if I were not so sure that I could repay you before you could possibly need it. And really, old fellow, it is an immense relief to my mind."

"I am glad of that," said Mortimer; "and I wish I could say that you could take your own time to repay me, but the fact is that I shall need the money."

"Yes, yes, I understand that, and of course I shall get it from my father and pay it back in a few days," said Mark hurriedly. "And see here, wouldn't it suit just as well if I stopped in here and waited for you? You know if I go to your boarding house we may meet your sister or your aunt, and they may begin to ask questions."

"Just as you like," replied Mortimer, glancing up at the hotel in front of which Mark had paused. "I'll be back here in a short time," and he went on while Mark turned into the hotel.

Mortimer had the fifty-dollar note that he had received from Mr. Davenant still in his pocket, but the other twenty-five was in his trunk ; so he hurried to Miss Halsey's. He had his latch-key, and saw no one as he let himself in.

"I wish Mark had not been so fussy about meeting any one," he thought as he went back to the hotel. He was beginning to feel tired and hungry after all his running about, but he did not care to complain and kept a cheerful face as he paid over the money.

Mark was apparently in a great hurry.

"I won't stop to give you my note for this, for in fact I expect to bring you back the money in a day or two. But all the same I'll write out the note for you to-morrow. I have hardly a minute to spare just now, for I think I have a chance of another and a better place than Harvey & Blake's, if I don't let it slip through my fingers." There was a nervousness in his manner and a merry twinkle in his eyes that Mortimer was at a loss to understand. "I have no time to explain now, but you will see what I mean pretty soon. And now I'm off. You have done me a better turn than you think, and I'll never forget it." With these rather enigmatical words Mark shook hands warmly and left Mortimer free to return home.

The consciousness of having done a kind action was not so cheering as Mortimer had expected that it would be ; and he went wearily up the steps of his boarding house with a depressed air. It was the second time that he had returned with empty pockets on pay day, and he could not help wondering whether he had been wise. As he entered the house he turned into the parlor hoping to find Bertha there; but to his surprise he found himself face to face with Mr. Davenant.

He wondered whether anything had gone wrong at the office after he had left; and then the thought flashed upon him that Mr. Davenant had been expecting him to return to the office again to report; although as he said nothing about it, Mortimer had supposed that it was not necessary.

"Mr. Palmer had no message, sir," he said. "Were you expecting me back this evening? Mr. Palmer spoke as though he expected me to spend the rest of the day at my mother's; so I supposed that I was not needed."

"But you did not stay at your mother's. In fact, you came right back to town by the next train," said Mr. Davenant dryly.

Mortimer flushed, feeling something peculiar in the keen gaze that was bent on him, but answered frankly, "Yes, sir, I did."

"Did you go straight out to Briarley?" asked Mr. Davenant.

"Yes, sir. Except," he added, hastily correcting himself, "that I stopped for a few minutes on the way to the station to get Jack a coat."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Davenant in a relieved tone; "then maybe that explains the trouble. The fact is," he continued hastily, "that the money you took out to Mr. Palmer has been tampered with."

"Tampered with! That is impossible. Why, I had it in my inside pocket from the time you handed me the package till I gave it into Mr. Palmer's hands," exclaimed Mortimer.

"Then how comes it that some of the money was missing when Mr. Palmer received it?" said Mr. Davenant. "Come, come, Winstead, it is the first time that there has been the slightest trouble from carelessness on your part; and I for one can say that I have not the least desire to be hard upon you. But of course we want to find the missing money, and only you can tell us where it is likely to have been lost or abstracted."

"Missing money!" said Mortimer, who had been growing paler as Mr. Davenant proceeded. "Indeed, sir, it is impossible that the money can be missing. I placed the package just as you gave it to me, in Mr. Palmer's own hands. Mr. Willoughby was with him at the time, and can tell you that I am speaking the truth. Mr. Palmer read your note and then told me that I could go down to see my mother. I asked if I should wait for any message to you and he said, no. I thought he was in a hurry for me to go, for Mr. Willoughby seemed to be anxious to get away. I heard Mr. Palmer say to him as I left the room: 'It is well you missed that train; this is good news worth waiting for, and you can just as well take a later train.'"

"Well, Mr. Palmer got the package as you say, but part of the money was gone," replied Mr. Davenant. "Whom did you talk with at the place where you got your lunch?"

"Nobody. I did not stop for any lunch. I only stopped to get Jack, who was waiting for me, and then we went to the store where we got his coat. But the place was not crowded and nobody even jostled against me, for when I had seven hundred dollars about me I took more notice than I would usually," said Mortimer. "I am sure that it was impossible for any one to rob me."

"Seven hundred and fifty," said Mr. Davenant, glancing at him keenly. "I replaced the fifty that I took out to pay you."

As he began Mortimer was a little taken aback, thinking that Mr. Davenant referred to the money of his own that he had had in his pocket, but at his last words he replied frankly :

"I don't know anything about that, sir ; you mentioned seven hundred to me, and I supposed that was the amount. How much is missing?"

"Fifty-five dollars," replied Mr. Davenant. "But it is not the question whether it is much or little, but where it went to," he finished testily. "See here, you come out with me to Mr. Palmer's and we will have the matter cleared up."

Mr. Davenant felt irritated that this should have occurred while he was in charge. If it had happened to Mr. Palmer he would probably have said that fifty-five dollars was not worth bothering about ; but now he was impatient to have the matter explained without any blame to himself. He caught up his hat and Mortimer had no choice but to follow him ; and thus he found himself hungry, tired, and utterly bewildered, again rushing off to the station to catch the train for Briarley. He suggested to Mr. Davenant that Mr. Palmer might have made a mistake in counting, but Mr. Davenant replied shortly :

"Mr. Willoughby counted the money with Mr. Palmer, and he brought it in for me to count when he came to me. There were five one-hundred-dollar bills, one fifty, five tens, and nineteen five-dollar gold pieces. I added the five tens myself in place of the note I gave you."

Mortimer had no further suggestion to make, as he now had to fall back upon the conviction that Mr. Davenant himself had counted wrong in the first place, and the trip to Briarley passed in uncomfortable silence. It was growing dusk as they reached Mr. Palmer's, and the library into which they were shown was lighted by one lamp on the table. Mr. Palmer sat in an easy-chair with his lame foot propped on a rest, and the first object that caught Mortimer's eye, gleaming brightly under the full rays of the lamp on the table at Mr. Palmer's elbow, was a five-dollar gold piece.

"Hello! so you have found it after all," exclaimed Mr. Davenant, whose eye also rested on the gold. "Come, that's good; and where is the note?"

"I have seen nothing of the note," replied Mr. Palmer, as he noticed Mortimer with a curt nod. "I did not find this. Mrs. Winstead brought it to me a few minutes ago and told me she found it in her son Jack's pocket."

Mortimer's face flushed crimson, and for the moment he felt as though some one had struck him.

"Why did my mother bring it to you?" he asked almost fiercely. "It can't be yours if she found it in Jack's pocket."

"I sent a messenger down for you as soon as we had counted the money and found beyond any doubt that it was wrong," said Mr. Palmer; "but you had returned to town in such a hurry that you were already gone. Your mother came up here a short time ago and told me that she had found this in Jack's pocket, and he told her some tale about having picked it up on the floor in our office; so she brought it to me at once."

"Well, sir, there is something very queer about all this," replied Mortimer. "But there is one thing that I can take my oath upon, and that is that Jack never knowingly put that coin in his pocket if it is the one you lost."

Mr. Davenant, who was beginning to feel sorry that he had brought Mortimer out with him, now interposed.

"We can't identify the coin," he said kindly, picking up the gold piece. "I think that Winstead would better go down and get the right of the story from his brother."

Mr. Palmer agreed. His manner was dry and curt; but Mortimer remembered that his business manner to his clerks was never otherwise, and Mr. Davenant's manner was kind and friendly; but still Mortimer's blood tingled with a horrible sense of suspicion resting on himself as he went down the hill to his home.

As soon as he was gone Mr. Davenant went over the whole business with his partner, and assured him that the money had not been out of his sight, and that no stranger had been in the office before he left it to go to his lunch.

"Where did you leave the money when you went out?" asked Mr. Palmer.

"On the desk. But I locked the door of the inner office," replied Mr. Davenant.

"What about the sliding window?" inquired his partner.

"H'm; I never thought about that. It was open, but nobody could get in through it," Mr. Davenant replied confidently.

"A slim boy might," remarked his partner. "Where was the office boy?"

"I had sent him out on an errand, and he had not returned when I came back," replied Mr. Davenant. "Only young Winstead was in the outer office."

"I have always found Mortimer perfectly honest and trustworthy," said Mr. Palmer in a musing tone. "You say that you left him alone there when you went out."

"No, not alone; his brother Jack was with him then," corrected Mr. Davenant.

"Oh, yes; but that don't help matters," growled Mr. Palmer. "I did feel sure that those Winsteads were honest. But, then, no one ought to throw temptation needlessly in the way of boys."

"It was an odd amount to take," said Mr. Davenant, who was very sensitive to any blame thrown upon himself and preferred to ignore his partner's last remark. "One would expect a thief to take it all."

"Lucky for Willoughby that he didn't," replied Mr. Palmer grimly. "He was in no sweet mood when he came out here. That boy of his has been getting into scrapes, I fancy."

"Willoughby lets him run too much at his own will, and then suddenly he checks him up short. That is no way to manage a young man," said Mr. Davenant with the confidence occasionally assumed by a man who has no sons when he sees his friend's son getting into trouble.

"Well, well, that's not our affair now," ejaculated Mr. Palmer. "We have enough to do to manage the young man who is on our hands."

"Does the mother suspect anything wrong?"

"Not a thing. She came in with the gold piece in her hand and told me that she was mending Jack's coat when she found in the pocket a quarter and what she took to be two new pennies, but a second glance showed her that one was a gold coin. She went to Jack to find out where he got it, and the boy said that you gave him the quarter."

"That's all right; so I did," interposed Mr. Davenant.

"And the pennies he picked up from the floor when Mortimer dropped his keys and some coins as he was pulling a pencil out of his pocket. Jack says that he returned the keys but Mortimer told him to keep the pennies; and he was in a hurry and never examined them, so he did not know that he had a gold piece," concluded Mr. Palmer.

"If Jack got the coin from his brother, what made his mother bring it up here? That's what I don't understand," said Mr. Davenant.

"She explained all that. She said that Mortimer had whisked in and out again in such a hurry in the afternoon that she was surprised, and she thought that he seemed bothered. Then my messenger came and that puzzled her, and when she found the gold piece that neither of the boys seemed to have known anything about, she just jumped at the conclusion that we had missed it and were worried about it, so she came right here to return it and explain. I told her that we had lost such a coin, but I could not say whether this was the one. However, she insisted on leaving it."

"Did you say anything about the fifty dollars?" asked Mr. Davenant.

"Not a word," replied Mr. Palmer energetically. "It began to look queer, I must confess," he added, knitting his brows gloomily. "But she is a good little woman and does her best to bring those children up well, so I was not going to upset her. We must sift the matter quietly. The sons of very good people do go wrong sometimes; but this is a case where we must be very cautious. I should not mind the money; I would give that amount to be sure that Mortimer's pocket had been picked at that store."

"Nobody could do that and leave the envelope all sealed up," remarked Mr. Davenant. "Besides, I had taken out fifty to pay Winstead, and I said at the time that I would just send you the remaining even seven hundred. Afterward I remembered that I had some tens in my pocket to settle a bill that I could just as well pay by check, and I wanted to send you the whole amount, so I laid the five tens on the pile; but any one counting it over after hearing what I had said might have fancied that I had counted wrong, and that the extra fifty would not be missed."

"So you suspect Mortimer," exclaimed Mr. Palmer sharply.

"No, no!" said Mr. Davenant, who had a tendency at times to talk out his thoughts without calculating the effect that his words were likely to produce. "I was only saying how it might have occurred to any one who overheard us."

"Jack, for instance, as he was the only one who could have overheard you, according to your own account," put in Mr. Palmer.

He was becoming irritated with his partner. Mr. Davenant had an easy-going dislike to getting the young clerk into trouble or believing any harm of him, and his manner and tone were kinder than Mr. Palmer's; but in fact Mr. Palmer, who lived close by the Winsteads and had associated with Mortimer daily for years, was much more keenly hurt by any suspicion that the lad was not worthy of the trust that he had reposed in him.

The entrance of Mortimer himself interrupted the conversation at this juncture and both partners turned quickly to hear what he had to say.

"I think that I can explain about that gold piece," said the lad eagerly. "Don't you remember, sir," addressing Mr. Davenant, "that you had some coins in your hand when you dropped your key? I thought that I heard two things fall, but I could see only the key and I hadn't time to search very thoroughly. I suppose that the gold piece really did fall, and rolled away to some corner where Jack picked it up when he scrambled after my keys and penny. That is the only explanation that I can see, for I know that I had no gold in my pocket so I could not have dropped it."

Mr. Palmer looked at his partner with evident surprise.

"Had you the gold in your hand when you came out with Mr. Appleby?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I had," admitted Mr. Davenant; "but I did not drop any of it. Of course I should have noticed at once if one of the coins had been gone when I went back to the inner office and laid them on the pile of notes."

"You were talking to me at the time, sir," persisted Mortimer, "and the loss of one out of twenty might easily pass unnoticed if you did not count them again."

"Perhaps you think that I dropped the note too," said Mr. Davenant coldly; and Mortimer perceived that while he had cleared Jack by shifting the blame to his employer's shoulders, he had decidedly changed the kindly interest of Mr. Davenant in himself.

Mr. Palmer now interposed and remarked that it was his dinner hour and he did not care to discuss the matter any further that evening.

"If you have not mentioned the missing note to your mother I think that you would better not worry her about it to-night," he remarked to Mortimer.

"I have told her already," replied Mortimer. "I did not see any reason to make a secret of it; but of course if you wish it, I will tell her not to mention it to any one else." He spoke almost haughtily, for it galled him to think that his employers were trying to "let him off easy" while in their hearts they suspected him of carelessness or worse.

"I think that it would be better to say nothing until we find out more about the affair," said Mr. Palmer.

"Just as you choose, sir," said Mortimer, and he said good-evening and departed as the butler came to the door to announce dinner.

Mr. Palmer was more annoyed than he cared to show. The matter seemed to be capable of but two solutions, one of which would indicate great carelessness on the part of Mr. Davenant and the other would prove absolute dishonesty on Mortimer's part. He knew his partner too well to feel much doubt about the truth of the explanation as to the presence of the gold piece in Jack's pocket, but he could hardly credit him with such carelessness as to miscount or mislay the fifty dollars.

CHAPTER XV

"WE ARE COUSINS"

MORTIMER went down the hill to the old farmhouse with his thoughts in a whirl of painful confusion. The mystery of the missing money had annoyed him simply because he had been thoroughly imbued with Mr. Palmer's correct and methodical business habits; but the consciousness that both his employers suspected him and were only trying to keep the matter quiet in order to spare him, drove him nearly wild with wounded pride.

"I believe that Mr. Davenant's careless, slipshod way of doing business is at the bottom of the whole trouble," he muttered to himself savagely; "but at least I have cleared Jack, and as for myself—oh, if I had only had that fifty-dollar note that he paid me this morning, I would have laid it down before him and told him to take it back and square up his accounts at my cost. If Mark pays me to-morrow I'll do it yet."

He tried to put a good face on the matter when he appeared before his mother, but she was too keen-sighted where her children were concerned, not to notice that he was worried. He said that he must go back to town that night and he stayed to supper only because it was already on the table and a refusal would have distressed her. Mrs. Brant's lively chatter at the table was a relief to him as it helped to let his own silence pass without remark; but her shrewd, kindly eyes were taking notice while her tongue rattled on in her homely fashion. She was quick and observant under conditions that she could understand, and with the unerring sympathy of the true mother's heart she divined that Mortimer was causing his mother anxiety.

Mrs. Winstead had arranged a little sitting room for Mrs. Brant by giving up to her what used to be the boys' room, and here Mr. and Mrs. Brant could retire whenever the latter felt indisposed or when there was company in the parlor whom they did not care to meet. This evening they both went upstairs early, thinking that Mrs. Winstead would like to have her children to herself when Mortimer was with them, and Mr. Brant, who was suffering from a slight cold, went to bed. Soon Mrs. Brant heard the front door close, and peeping through the blind saw Mortimer's figure going down the path.

"There is something wrong," she thought, "and that poor soul will just lie awake and worry because she has nobody to talk to. I wonder whether she would talk to me. I'll give her the chance;" and she slipped quietly over to her sitting room.

There she sat busying herself with a bit of mending until the children had gone upstairs to bed and she heard Mrs. Winstead going her usual nightly rounds to see that the house was locked up. Then she set her door ajar so that the light would gleam out on the staircase. Her friendly ruse succeeded, for Mrs. Winstead coming upstairs stopped at the half-opened door to ask if Mrs. Brant needed anything.

"No, nothing, unless you feel inclined to sit down a bit and keep me company while I patch this hole," said Mrs. Brant briskly.

It flashed upon Mrs. Winstead that there could not be a more favorable opportunity to explain to Mrs. Brant the relationship, and she accepted the friendly invitation.

"I hope that you have good news of your son," she said as soon as they were cosily seated beside the stove.

"Yes, indeed; he is doing finely," said his mother proudly. "He is getting bigger pay now, and see what he has sent me in the letter I got to-day." She drew the letter out of her pocket and unfolding it displayed a ten-dollar bill.

Mrs. Winstead congratulated her warmly, both on her son's success and on his thoughtfulness.

"Yes, Felix is a good lad. He is not the sort to let his parents be entirely dependent upon strangers when he can work to help them," said Mrs. Brant with a pleased smile.

"You don't mean to call us strangers, I hope," said Mrs. Winstead. "I do not feel so and I don't want you to think that."

"No, indeed," replied Mrs. Brant heartily. "Why from the very first evening I felt that we had got right in among friends; and dear me, there is that girl Jessica—it does seem to me that she should rightly be mine," she added with a little laugh. "You have two others, you know, and I have no daughter."

"Jessica is a dear, good girl," said Mrs. Winstead, "but I don't think that she ever took to any one as she has to you. Bertha being the oldest, and Helen being everybody's pet, Jessica fell rather into the background." Then plunging boldly into the subject that she had in mind, she said: "People used to say that she was very like her great-aunt, Jessica Merrivale, my father's sister; but I always remember my Aunt Jessica as a very precise and at times a very sharp-tempered old lady, though really she was very kind to me."

"Your Jessica can't be much like her in disposition," said Mrs. Brant. Then after a momentary hesitation she remarked : "I have heard that I had an aunt named Jessica Merrivale ; but I never saw her or even heard much about her. She was my father's sister, and my mother had a notion that she was not at all kind. At any rate she did not seem to care much about my father. He died before I was born, so you see I never really saw any one belonging to that family. Still I gave the name to my son, for I wanted him to have my father's name in full."

"I had the same wish," said Mrs. Winstead, "and I named my oldest son for my father. I have heard that my father had a brother Felix who died out West, or was killed, I should say, for I believe that the first his family knew of it was through seeing the account of an accident in a Western paper that was sent to them. But we have always supposed that he died unmarried, for he had never written home that he was married."

"Well, now," exclaimed Mrs. Brant, who was thoroughly roused to ask and to give information. "I believe that we shall find out that we are own cousins. Would you mind?"

"I should be very glad," said Mrs. Winstead frankly, and leaning forward she kissed Mrs. Brant's cheek, down which a tear had begun to roll as she asked the question.

Mrs. Brant got up, and going to a bracket in the corner of the room, took down a small Bible, and opening the book at the fly leaf, she pointed to an inscription :

"Jessica Merrivale, from her brother, Felix."

"I came across that one day when I was dusting, and I showed it to my husband, but he told me not to say anything."

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Winstead still more surprised.

"Well, you see you had been so real kind to us, and he didn't know but there might have been some old quarrel ;

and he said it would be a poor return to you for us to go raking up any old stories. If you wanted to tell us anything, you would do it when you felt like it."

"I wish that I had spoken to you about this matter sooner," said Mrs. Winstead, deeply touched by the delicacy of feeling shown by this reticence.

After this beginning both ladies went back to reminiscences of their youth, and the question of the relationship was fully settled in their minds before they said good-night. As to the property and the will, Mrs. Winstead determined that she would get Mr. Lindsay to explain that to Mr. Brant at the first opportunity. She did not now dread any clashing or any unfriendly feeling. In getting this burden off her mind her anxiety about Mortimer had lessened.

"God is smoothing the way for me wonderfully. Truly I can say, 'Blessed are they that put their trust in him,'" she thought as she went to her own room, and she laid her head on her pillow with a peaceful and thankful spirit.

Mr. Brant's cold was such that he was obliged to keep in his room the next morning. Nothing was said to the children about the conversation of the preceding evening, but Mrs. Winstead found time to write to Aunt Rachel and tell her about it, and to urge that she would persuade Bertha to come out in a friendly spirit to meet her cousins. This done she was busy in the schoolroom with Helen and Jessica, when a shadow passed the window and Helen exclaimed:

"There is Mortimer again. He is kept all the time running in and out, now that Mr. Palmer is laid up."

Her mother pushed the books hastily aside, and saying: "Take your arithmetic now, girls; I will correct the exercises after I have spoken to Mortimer," she went out to meet him.

Her own face was bright and smiling, but his had a stern and haggard expression that she had never seen on it before.

"What is the matter? Is there more trouble about that money?" she faltered as he drew her into the parlor and shut the door.

"Yes," he said gloomily as he threw himself on the sofa. "I'm in a bad plight; and the worst of it is that I don't deserve it a bit. I told you last night that Mr. Palmer did not want to have the missing note talked about, but that is no reason that you and I should not talk." Then he began and told her all about the money and how it was given to him.

"It is very mysterious and very annoying, but don't feel so badly about it, dear. As I took back the gold piece at once, it is plain that it only got into Jack's pocket through heedlessness. If he had looked closely at the coins that he picked up, you would both have seen at once that it did not belong to you. But he is clear now, and no one, I am sure, can doubt your part in the matter," and Mrs. Winstead laid her hand with a warm pressure upon that of her son.

"There is just the trouble," said Mortimer hoarsely. "I am sure that Mr. Palmer does suspect me. He overheard me saying that I wanted a rise in salary, and to-day he asked me if I had still the fifty-dollar bill that Mr. Davenant gave me in payment of last month's salary."

"Well, dear, I don't suppose that means anything," replied his mother anxiously. "You told me that it was given to you out of that money, and very likely he is trying to identify the missing note. You could let him see it, for you could not have been in town in time to deposit it in bank yesterday."

"I have no money in bank, mother; I have not the fifty-dollar bill, and in fact I have only three dollars all told," exclaimed Mortimer desperately.

His mother looked at him a moment aghast. "Have you spent it all?" she asked faintly.

"No; there is my folly," said Mortimer bitterly. "I have lent it. I told Mr. Palmer that much, but it would not be honorable to tell to whom I have lent it, as it would get the fellow into trouble, and I can see that Mr. Palmer does not like the looks of it. I suppose he thinks that I am getting into bad company," he continued, his face flushing angrily; "but the fellow I lent it to is not bad. He may be foolish in the way he lets his money go, but I am sure he's not bad."

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" groaned Mrs. Winstead, "that is just what wrecked your father. But stay," she exclaimed, suddenly checking herself as she saw the look of misery on her son's face and forcing herself to think of some cheering word for him; "that was all your own money, and the question is only about the lost note. If Mr. Davenant dropped the gold piece in that heedless manner, why is it not probable that he made a mistake in counting the notes? Possibly he mislaid it even."

"That won't help me a bit unless I can prove it most unmistakably," said Mortimer. "It is the very snag that I ran against in clearing Jack. Mr. Davenant was very friendly until I mentioned the dropped key and the coins in his hand. Then he stiffened up. Of course he does not like to be proved careless in the eyes of his partner, and really I don't see myself how he could be so careless twice over," added Mortimer. "But as there was absolutely nobody in the office that morning but Mr. Davenant and Jack and me, it must lie between us."

"There was the gentleman who paid the money," corrected Mrs. Winstead. "Jack told me that he met him coming out just as he got there."

"Oh, of course Mr. Appleby was there," said Mortimer. "But he had gone before all this trouble ; and by the way, Jack could not have seen him, for he went out while Mr. Davenant and I were in the outer office, and I did not see Jack come in."

"I am sure that Jack told me some one came out as he went in," repeated Mrs. Winstead positively.

"But that is impossible. I only heard the door open once," said Mortimer.

"Jack can tell you about it," said his mother. "You ought to ask him, for I am sure that he said somebody came out as he went in."

"To be sure I'll ask him ; where is he?" exclaimed Mortimer excitedly. "I won't leave a stone unturned to get at the bottom of this matter. I believe that Mr. Palmer and Mr. Davenant are so sluggish about the affair and want me to tell no one about it because they think that I am to blame, and they want to let me off easy because of previous good conduct—isn't that the phrase?" and he laughed bitterly.

Mrs. Winstead grew very pale, but she answered steadfastly : "Trust in the Lord, my son, and he will make it clear."

"I don't know," muttered Mortimer. "It does seem hard that this should come upon me when I have been keeping a straight and steady course. I can't see that I deserved it."

Mrs. Winstead's lips trembled. The loss of his money through foolish lending and the loss of his employer's confidence through the strange mystery she could bear up against, but that her boy should lose his faith in the one Friend who never could err, was too much for her, and she broke down and wept bitterly after Mortimer had hurried out of the room in search of Jack and she was left alone.

CHAPTER XVI

JACK GIVES A CLUE

MRS. WINSTEAD was making a brave effort to recover her self-control and was drying her eyes when the sound of an embarrassed cough behind her caused her to start and look toward the door that Mortimer had left slightly ajar as he went out.

Mr. Lindsay stood there wiping his eyeglasses carefully preparatory to placing them on his nose. She rose at once and extended her hand with a cordial greeting, for it flashed into her mind that he had written to her that he would run out soon to consult with her concerning an investment that was not turning out well. She hoped that he had not noticed that she was crying, and he proceeded at once to draw out a package of papers, so that his eyes were not turned to her face.

"I hope that it is not an inconvenient time for me to interrupt you," he said kindly; "but I came out to explain to you about that mortgage business. The fact is that your trustees made a bad calculation there. Real estate went down in that neighborhood, and the property was put up for sale. It was going for less than the value of the mortgage, so they bought it in. They think that it will sell better under more favorable circumstances, and meanwhile they hope to rent it fairly well; but just at present it cuts off from your income the amount of interest that you used to receive on that mortgage." He spread out some papers and was going on, but Mrs. Winstead interrupted him gently.

"I am sorry that it should happen just now," she said; "but no doubt it will prove to be all right and for the best in the end. Just now I have something so much more serious to think of that I want to ask your advice about that. Would you mind letting those papers wait?"

"Certainly not," replied Mr. Lindsay, folding the papers and replacing them in their envelope as he prepared to listen. To his surprise Mrs. Winstead flushed and hesitated. She had just remembered that Mortimer had told her to speak to no one about the lost money, and she felt sorely puzzled as to what she could say to Mr. Lindsay.

"I hope that you have had no further trouble about that question of relationship," he remarked.

"About the Brants?" said Mrs. Winstead. "No, I have had no trouble at all; but there is something that I wanted very much to ask you to do for me."

Catching eagerly at this thought that had been almost pushed from her mind by Mortimer's difficulty, she told of her talk with Mrs. Brant, and ended by asking him to explain to her and to Mr. Brant the exact terms of Miss Jessica Merrivale's will.

"You can explain it all so much more clearly than I can," she said, anxiously watching Mr. Lindsay's face as he sat with his eyes fixed on the toe of his boot. At last he looked up and inquired:

"Am I to understand that you wish me to tell Mr. Brant that if his wife can legally prove her relationship to your Uncle Felix she will be entitled to one-half of the property that you now enjoy?"

"That is exactly what I wish. And please explain why I cannot give it up without good legal proof," said Mrs. Winstead; "for personally I am quite convinced of the truth of Mrs. Brant's story."

"Suppose that they can furnish legal proof," suggested Mr. Lindsay. "As far as Mr. Atherton could discover, none exists. But we must face the possibility that it may be forthcoming before we spur on the Brant family to search for it."

"I have faced that possibility," replied Mrs. Winstead in a low but firm voice. "If they can furnish the necessary proofs, let the property be settled accordingly."

"Since that is your decision I suppose that I would better see Mr. Brant at once," said Mr. Lindsay, and Mrs. Winstead rose to fetch him.

After she had left the room Mr. Lindsay sat musing. "On the whole this is a wise decision," he thought. "Atherton believes that the rogue Hamilton is in town ; and he also thinks that Hamilton knows something about the Brants. If that is the case it is much better that there should be a clear understanding between all the parties concerned. Nothing so completely upsets the plans of a rogue as finding himself among people who are not afraid to speak the truth. But I don't believe that this little woman has the smallest suspicion that Hamilton might make mischief. It is clear Christianity on her part, and I must say that I have generally found that people wear their Christianity, like their Sunday clothes, to church, and keep another suit for business purposes."

The return of Mrs. Winstead, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Brant, interrupted his musings, and as soon as the first greetings had passed, Mr. Lindsay plunged at once into the subject, and in his usual dry and business-like manner explained all the provisions of Miss Jessica's will. Mr. and Mrs. Brant listened with evident surprise. While they had suspected the relationship, they had never suspected that it gave them any claim to property. Mr. Lindsay addressed himself directly to Mr. Brant, and when he had finished, it was that gentleman who replied.

"This is," he said in his calm, deliberate voice, "a complete surprise to me and to my wife; but I think that I can speak for her as well as for myself in saying that we should deeply regret any litigation. As far as I have any knowledge, there is no legal proof of the marriage of my wife's parents except the certificate that her mother possessed."

"That, owing to the peculiar circumstances of this case, would have to be proved to be authentic," said Mr. Lindsay. "Of course such a document might fall into the wrong hands—I am only mentioning this to show you why we must be so particular," he explained with a deprecatory wave of his hand toward Mrs. Brant; "and no one seems to have been aware of the marriage until after the death of Mr. Merrivale."

"Oh, no, the neighbors knew that my mother was married," put in Mrs. Brant.

"Ah, who were the neighbors?" asked Mr. Lindsay.

"Well, I can't say. I may have heard names, but I don't just recall any now. It was a pretty lonesome place, and they didn't see many folks, I guess," said Mrs. Brant.

"Do you suppose advertising would bring any reliable information?" asked Mr. Lindsay.

"Oh, no, not when it all happened so long ago. Besides, I would not let anybody go advertising for proofs of my mother's marriage, as though there was anybody doubting it," exclaimed Mrs. Brant hotly.

"As I understand it," interposed Mr. Brant's calm voice, "any such proofs would materially injure one who has been very kind to my wife and myself. I have, of course, no knowledge of the value of the property at present owned by Mrs. Winstead; but any surmises that I may have indulged in have not placed it at such a figure as would admit of a division into two equal shares without serious detriment to our kind cousin and to her family. This idea of a possible claim to property being totally unexpected by myself, and I am sure by my wife also, we have naturally held no consultation as to any advisable course of procedure; but I think that I may safely say that it is not the desire of either of us to take any measures that would injure one for whom we have learned to entertain sentiments of the strongest affection and esteem, and to whom we are deeply grateful."

"Certainly not; I should hate to think of such a thing," eagerly broke in Mrs. Brant, whose bright eyes had been fixed on Mrs. Winstead's pale face, and who had showed a suspicion of restless impatience during her husband's deliberate speech.

"You are very good—very kind," said Mrs. Winstead; "but please do not think that I am at all anxious about this money. I wish it could all be settled as Aunt Jessica meant. I am afraid that I cared too much at first; but then I did not know you, and besides that there are troubles much worse than the loss of part of one's income. I only want all settled exactly fairly." She had flushed and grown pale as she spoke, and her words became a little incoherent as her eyes again filled with tears.

"My dear," interrupted Mrs. Brant with prompt and kindly decision, "we are not going to talk over this matter any more now. If you are not tired of us you will just tell us to stay on here a bit longer, till Mr. Brant gets real strong and able to take up his work again; but we will keep to ourselves all this question of relationship so nobody's tongue can be set wagging until it suits ourselves. That will be all right, sir, won't it?" she asked, turning to Mr. Lindsay.

"Certainly, madame," he responded with alacrity, as he was greatly pleased to find that these dreaded claimants took such a kindly and unselfish view of the matter, and he was also beginning to be in a hurry to get back to other engagements in town.

While Mrs. Winstead was warmly assuring her cousins how very welcome they were to a home with her at the old farmhouse, he quietly did up his papers and rose to depart, feeling that a much more important matter than the one that brought him out had been satisfactorily settled. As they went out into the hall Mrs. Winstead glanced into the dining room hoping yet half dreading that the boys would appear, but they were nowhere in sight. She said good-bye to Mr. Lindsay, and turned back after closing the door behind him to meet Mrs. Brant standing at the foot of the stairs.

"Now, my dear," said that little lady briskly, "we are kin, and while we don't mean to parade it before everybody, don't you forget that your joys and sorrows are ours, and if you have any troubles or worries that you don't mind sharing, come to me and my husband." She looked full into Mrs. Winstead's quivering face as she spoke, and then reaching up kissed her.

Poor Mrs. Winstead could only trust herself to murmur a low "Thank you," but she returned the kiss, and a friendship was sealed between the two women that no words could strengthen.

"Mamma," called Jessica's voice from the schoolroom door, "can you come now? Helen is fretting herself into a headache over these sums, and I don't know what has come over her; she makes mistakes in the very easiest of them.

Mrs. Winstead gave a nervous start, but quickly controlling herself went to the schoolroom, where she found Helen sitting leaning her head on her hands in a listless, disconsolate manner, quite unlike her lively little self. As soon as her mother entered she burst out crying, saying that her sums were so hard and her throat hurt her, and she was so tired that she did not know what to do with herself.

"Never mind, dear, let the sums go for the present," said her mother soothingly as she took the child's hot feverish hand in her own. "You have taken cold and you would better come upstairs and lie down."

Helen obeyed willingly and Mrs. Winstead gave her some simple remedy that she always kept on hand for feverish colds, and devoted herself to the work of soothing her and making her more comfortable. She told herself that she must not let her anxiety over Mortimer's difficulties make her nervously alarmed over everything ; and as soon as Helen was quieted she slipped away for a few minutes to pour out a fervent prayer to the Helper who had never failed her. As she came downstairs again feeling strengthened and refreshed she met Jack, who came in cold and rosy.

"Mortimer has gone back to town," he said in answer to her questions. "He met Mr. Lindsay and they went to the station together. Poor old Mort is in a great stew over something, but he won't tell me what is the matter. It is some bother at the office I suppose, for he asked me a lot of questions about a fellow that I met coming out as I went in."

"I was sure that you told me you met somebody," exclaimed his mother eagerly. "What did he look like?"

"He was short and slim and he had reddish hair and moustache. He looked like a smug, conceited sort of little chap," replied Jack with lofty disdain.

"Did Mortimer say that he knew who it was?" asked Mrs. Winstead, too anxious for information to remember that she might be exciting Jack to ask awkward questions.

"No, he didn't say that he knew. He was as mum as a detective," replied Jack in an injured tone. "But I told him that he could find out the man's name from Mr. Mark Willoughby. He knows him."

"How do you know that?" asked his mother almost sharply in her surprise.

"Because he sent me racing after him with a note that same morning," said Jack promptly.

"Oh, you mean when Mr. Davenant sent you to Mr. Willoughby's with the letter," said Mrs. Winstead, relieved to find Jack's association with Mark Willoughby was purely accidental. "Now go upstairs quietly, my boy, for Helen is not well. I may want you to go for Doctor Scott if she does not seem better by afternoon."

March seemed to be encroaching upon April, for it was still cold and bleak, and the snow lingered in patches, while a cloudy sky seemed to threaten rain. Helen's fever seemed to abate a little and she slept during the afternoon; but she passed such a bad night that Mrs. Winstead sent for the doctor the first thing in the morning. After examining his patient the old doctor inquired what contagious diseases she had had.

"Helen and Bertha had the chicken-pox; and I believe that is all," said Mrs. Winstead. "The others have had nearly all the diseases that children catch; but that was before Helen was born, and Bertha happened to be away with her aunt at the time sickness was in the house."

"Well, I cannot say positively, but this is beginning in the same way that some of the contagious diseases start," said the doctor. "You would better keep her away from the other children. The older ones are in town, are they not? Well, so much the better."

"I expect Bertha home this evening," said Mrs. Winstead. "She is coming out to see us."

"Telegraph to her to wait till to-morrow," replied the doctor shortly. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Then he left his directions and promising to stop in the next morning he went downstairs. Mrs. Winstead would have accompanied him, but he waved her back saying: "No, no, don't tire yourself with unnecessary steps."

In the passage he was met by Mrs. Brant, who was anxious to learn his opinion of the little patient, and to her he spoke more freely.

"There is a case of scarlet fever and one of diphtheria in the village, and I cannot tell until to-morrow how this will turn. I don't want to alarm Mrs. Winstead, but I want the child isolated until we are sure what is the matter."

"Jack has gone with Mr. Brant to Mr. Marshall's," said Mrs. Brant. "They are to help Mrs. Marshall to cover a batch of Sunday-school library books."

"All right; let them stay there till they are sent for," said Dr. Scott in his quick way, and he said good-bye and hurried off.

As the door closed behind him, Mrs. Brant heard Mrs. Winstead's voice calling Jane, and the kitchen door opened and Jane appeared with floury hands and a face that showed plainly that she did not like to be interrupted in the kneading of a batch of bread.

"Maybe I can do what is needed," said Mrs. Brant, who was on very friendly terms with Jane, and stood high in Jane's good graces because she was "a quiet, peaceable body, and not a bit upsetting in her ways."

It proved to be the telegram that Mrs. Winstead was eager to send at once to Bertha, and also a message to the druggist.

"Jessica can attend to it," said Mrs. Winstead, as soon as she heard how Jane was employed; "but please take it to her, and don't let her come to the room."

Mrs. Brant willingly copied out the telegram and went in search of Jessica, who was feeling lonely and depressed without Helen and was glad to find that there was something for her to do. She had hardly been gone five minutes when there was a ring at the door bell that made Jane again take her hands from her bread. But Mrs. Brant was at hand as before and cheerfully offered to go to the door. Jane, who prided herself on knowing everybody in the neighborhood, peeped through the crack of the kitchen door to see that Mrs. Brant did not have to trouble Mrs. Winstead. As she heard the voice of a stranger inquiring for Mrs. Brant, she withdrew her head and returned to her kneading with the remark:

"Well, he's easy served, for he's got the body he wants right before his nose."

CHAPTER XVII

HOW MRS. BRANT MET INSINUATIONS

MRS. BRANT was showing the stranger into the parlor, wondering greatly in her own mind what he could want of her, and who he could be, as she did not recognize him.

He solved the latter point by handing her a card, on which was engraved the name Robert G. Hamilton, and saying, with a bow :

"I must introduce myself, Mrs. Brant, for I do not suppose that you would remember me, though I used to know your mother."

"I don't remember your name," said Mrs. Brant, with her usual outspoken frankness, as she glanced from the card to her visitor with a puzzled feeling that she had seen his face before. But he replied immediately :

"That is not strange, as I knew your mother a good many years ago, farther back than a lady is likely to remember," he put in, with an attempt at facetiousness that was entirely lost upon Mrs. Brant, who pushed a chair toward him and sat down herself in silence. "I was a young fellow then," he continued, "and your mother and her folks were kind to me, so when I heard that you were here I thought I would like to make myself known to you."

Mrs. Brant was too truthful, and too little used to polite conventionalities, to say that she was glad to see him, for really she did not like his face. Still, as she knew nothing of him, she felt a little ashamed of her prejudice, and she simply puckered her brows in the vain effort to recall some association that might account for her dim impression that she had seen him before. Her silence did not seem to disconcert him, for he began again :

"You have not been very long in this part of the country, and it occurred to me that an old friend, as I might almost call myself, could perhaps do you a good turn. How is your son getting on?"

"Very well. Very well, indeed," replied Mrs. Brant.

"Ah! I am glad to hear that," remarked Mr. Hamilton, with a little surprise in his tone. "Young men without capital sometimes find it rather hard to get a start."

"Some men who begin with nothing come out far ahead of those who start with their pockets full," said Mrs. Brant tersely.

"That is true, very true, indeed ; still, a little to start with is not a bad thing ; and no doubt you have often thought that you would like to give your son a little help," said Mr. Hamilton in an insinuating tone.

"I have helped him all I can, for I did my best to bring him up steady and honest, to fear God, and to be just to his fellows," replied Mrs. Brant, looking her visitor in the face.

"Hm, ah yes, very—very praiseworthy," said Mr. Hamilton, stammering a little ; but he quickly recovered himself and said : "Mrs. Brant, that is spoken just as I imagined that you would speak, and it makes me the more satisfied that I have this opportunity to talk with you. The fact is that I have a little private information to give to you that may be of considerable value to yourself and to your good husband, as well as helpful to your son. Can we talk here without fear of interruption, or shall we appoint some other time and place?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't say all you have got to say here,'' replied Mrs. Brant. ''Mrs. Winstead is occupied with one of her children, who is sick.''

''I see that you don't fully trust me,'' said Mr. Hamilton, smiling as he noticed Mrs. Brant's brusque tone. ''Well, it is right to be cautious until one knows people. However, to show you that I really know what I am talking about, I think that I had better explain to you at once one of the motives that brought me here. You will see then that I am inclined to act purely in your interest.''

''If I've got anything to say, I always say it out,'' remarked Mrs. Brant, ''and I never could see any good reason why other folks shouldn't do the same. It saves lots of time and trouble.''

''Quite true. I see that you know how to hit the nail on the head,'' replied Mr. Hamilton with a little laugh. Then drawing his chair a little closer, and speaking in a low, impressive tone, he continued: ''The fact is, Mrs. Brant, that, although you are not aware of it, you are at present staying with relations, and the reason why I wished to speak to you privately is just this: Mrs. Winstead and her family are perfectly well aware of the relationship and they are planning to keep it a secret from you and your husband, plotting to defraud you, to put it plainly.''

''There you are mistaken——'' began Mrs. Brant hotly; but he interrupted her.

''I know very well that this takes you by surprise. In short, it is a shock to you and you are unwilling to believe anything that looks like casting a slur on one who has befriended you and your husband; and therefore I have not come to you with only my own suspicions. I have made most careful inquiries, and am prepared to prove all that I say. Did your mother ever speak to you of your aunt, Miss Jessica Merrivale?''

"Yes, I have heard the name," replied Mrs. Brant, who had now so much curiosity to learn what was coming that she curbed her indignation.

"Did she ever say anything about Miss Jessica Merrivale's will?" he asked.

"No; my mother never heard whether she was alive or dead, and it was not likely that she would know anything about her will," replied Mrs. Brant. "We had nothing to do with her."

"Exactly," said Mr. Hamilton. "That is as I supposed. But now it is only right that you should know that you are the heir to a large share of Miss Merrivale's property, and your share is now entirely in the hands of Mrs. Winstead. Now perhaps you can see the game that Mrs. Winstead and her lawyer are trying to play upon you; and you will understand my indignation when I discovered it. Under the guise of friendship she is keeping you and your husband from making any effort to gain what rightfully belongs to you."

"I see nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Brant bluntly. "If Mrs. Winstead had the design that you would have me believe, she would never have taken pains to bring us East, and even into her house, at a time when she knew that if she let us alone we were likely to die in poverty away out in Colorado, where we should never be likely to hear of her or her property, and nobody about her would ever have heard of us."

"Wait a moment," said Mr. Hamilton impressively. "Suppose that Mrs. Winstead did not know that you had never heard of her, nor of the will. Suppose, on the contrary, that she knew that you were either in possession of these facts, or likely soon to be informed of them. And suppose that she and her eldest son consulted together and then decided if they could get hold of you and play upon your feelings by acting a charitable part—with your own money, remember—they could keep you in ignorance, or at least hamper you with the feeling that you would injure benefactors if you pushed inquiries."

"Well, suppose all this if you like, sir," said Mrs. Brant, who was beginning to read her visitor, and did not care to furnish him with any information, at least until she found out how much he already knew; "what then?"

"I only interfere in this matter at all through the feeling of respect and gratitude that I had for your mother, and a desire to repay to her daughter the kindnesses she showed to me," said Mr. Hamilton. "My own feelings would lead me naturally to shun such people as Mrs. Winstead and her two sons have shown themselves to be. I might also add the older daughter to the list," he added with a scornful tone. "You have not met her, I believe?" He paused for a reply, and Mrs. Brant replied shortly:

"No, I have not."

"I supposed as much," he said, with a slight shrug. "But really she is much less to blame, as with her it is at all events open enmity. She heartily detests both you and your husband, and will not enter the house while you are in it. Very probably she has the sense to be afraid of the game that the others are playing."

"Sir," exclaimed Mrs. Brant indignantly, "what do you suppose that I can think of a man, a perfect stranger to me, who comes and tells me such tales?"

"Ah! you mistrust me still," said Mr. Hamilton, with a deprecatory smile. "I laid myself open to that, I see, and evidently the Winsteads calculated well on your loyal nature. But I can tell you one thing that will serve to show you what sort of people you have to deal with. Do you know that young Mortimer Winstead lies under suspicion of having stolen a fifty-dollar note from his employers? Do you know that the evidence was found that he had bribed his young brother with a share in the booty to help him in the robbery? No," he continued, as Mrs. Brant began a hasty denial, "I see that you do not know all this. Mrs. Winstead would not tell you; she is doing her best to cover it up. I have no doubt that if she could she would pay the money back and hush up the matter. She did take back the gold piece that was her younger son's share, but Mortimer Winstead has been squandering in town both his own salary and all that she had saved, so she cannot replace the fifty dollars unless she has time given her. I would not be afraid to prophesy that a young man who has done so badly when he has been only a few weeks away from his mother's apron string, will manage to get into fresh disgrace before this is cleared off."

Mrs. Brant looked intensely distressed. The fact that Mrs. Winstead was in some serious trouble had been very plain to her, and she had heard enough and noticed enough to convince her that the trouble was in some way connected with Mortimer's work, but the idea that there was any question of dishonesty connected with it had not once occurred to her. She felt an unconquerable dislike to this man, but evidently he knew enough to piece out a very plausible and very ill-sounding story. Though she was usually as quick of speech as her husband was slow, in this emergency she could not decide what to say.

"I see that you are shocked," continued Mr. Hamilton, after waiting a few minutes and finding that she remained silent. "I was shocked too, though I cannot say that I was surprised, for I knew this young man's father, and his dealings were none of the straightest. I helped him out of a good many difficulties, and lost a good deal of money through him. He died and there was an end of that matter, for I did not mean to press his widow, and since she came into this property she has taken good care to avoid me. It made no difference to me, for I had no intention of making any claim. If I lose my money by mistaken friendship for a man, I am not the one to screw it out of women and children after his death. But when I discovered that his son was following in his footsteps, and that you and your husband were in the clutches of people of that stamp, I could not make up my mind to pass by indifferently without giving you a word of warning."

"What do you mean by a word of warning?" asked Mrs. Brant abruptly.

"I mean that instead of allowing yourself to be deceived and fleeced by them, you ought to claim your rights and then wash your hands of them entirely," replied Mr. Hamilton, in low, incisive tones.

"What if I say that I think that you are completely misinformed or mistaken in your information and your guesses?" said Mrs. Brant shrewdly.

"I will give you more proofs," said the man with an air of patient tolerance. "First, a small thing, but it will serve to show you that I am not inventing. Has not Mrs. Winstead's daughter been expected several times and has she not always failed to come?"

Mrs. Brant nodded. She would not give him any more information than she could help ; but when it came to a plain question she answered, as she always did, truthfully.

"Well," he continued, "I heard from her own lips that she did not mean to come here as long as you and Mr. Brant remained, as she disliked to associate with low and vulgar people. Pardon me for repeating the terms in which this young lady spoke of yourself and of your most accomplished and high-minded husband. Now the second proof is in a more important matter. Your claim requires to be proved, and I fancy that you will need proofs of the marriage of your parents. Possibly you would find it difficult to produce them as this matter has never been called in question ; but I can engage to furnish sufficiently strong proofs to satisfy any court."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Brant quickly.

"You begin to trust me a little now," he said with a smile, for his watchful eye had noticed that the color flew into her cheeks at his version of Bertha's words. "Well," he continued, assuming a confidential tone, "the fact is that I should have brought these proofs of which I speak, and have placed the whole affair entirely in your hands to be acted upon at once ; but I am slightly hampered about procuring these proofs because it involves a moderate amount of expense and that I am unfortunately unable to meet. For the first time I seriously regret the money that I threw away in helping Mrs. Winstead's husband, for if I had it I could now use it for your benefit."

"How much is this going to cost?" asked Mrs. Brant, eyeing him keenly. She seemed now to have laid aside all her anxiety and her suspicions and to have resumed her practical businesslike way of looking at things. "You know that we are not rich people."

"Well, the expense might be anywhere from fifty to one hundred dollars," said Mr. Hamilton, apparently calculating as he spoke. "I could not say exactly, because I am not sure what amount of traveling would have to be done. However, I can assure you of this much, that I would do it all as cheaply as possible, and I think that I have facilities that would enable me to do it cheaper than any one else. I only wish that I could do it entirely out of my own pocket."

"I don't want you to do anything for me out of your own pocket," returned Mrs. Brant brusquely. "That is not my way of doing business. So you think it will take one hundred dollars to do this. Well, I have not got it."

"Oh, no, I do not say that," replied Mr. Hamilton. "The expense may not exceed fifty; and at any rate I should not expect to have to lay out the whole sum at once. If you authorize me to proceed, you need give me only enough to begin the necessary inquiries."

"Then if I were to pay you fifty dollars, you think that would be all that is necessary," said Mrs. Brant in a considering tone.

"Yes," he said, "fifty dollars would do, and I will engage to furnish all necessary proofs."

"Well," said Mrs. Brant rising from her chair and drawing a long breath. "Now, Mr. Hamilton, I've listened to a good deal from you and you can listen to a little from me. Mrs. Winstead has concealed nothing from me, as I was going to tell you at first, if you hadn't been so eager to talk. I know a great deal more about her family and her money matters than you do; and she told me all herself. What you have said about her sons and her daughter I am free to believe or doubt, just as I choose. But I'll tell you this: I shall not pay you nor anybody else fifty dollars to prove my mother's marriage."

"Of course, you will do just as you please," said Mr. Hamilton, who had also risen to his feet and drawn in his lips closely during her words. "If you have not that amount at your disposal, it is unfortunate; for it means the loss to you of a very much larger sum."

"I have got that amount at my disposal," exclaimed

Mrs. Brant, who was now thoroughly roused by his sneering tone and forgot for the moment her prudent self-control. "I could give it to you this minute if I chose, but I do not choose. And I'll tell you another thing, Mr. Hamilton : if there is any truth in the rigmarole that you have told me, and if fifty dollars will clear Mortimer Winstead from what is, I am sure, an unjust suspicion, I'll give it every penny, before he and his mother shall suffer, though it is all I've got. Now I think we have said all that we need to say to each other," and with cheeks as rosy and her eyes bright as any young girl's, Mrs. Brant whipped briskly around and opened the parlor door.

Mr. Hamilton had no alternative but to walk out, and Mrs. Brant followed him and closed the house door behind him.

CHAPTER XVIII

HELEN'S ILLNESS INTERFERES

MRS. BRANT'S first impulse was to go to Mrs. Winstead and offer all the sympathy and help that lay in her power; but the sound of Helen's fretful cry reminded her that she could have no conversation now. She felt too restless and indignant to settle quietly to any work, and she went to the kitchen where Jane was silently paring potatoes for the dinner.

"I wish I had gone out myself. See what a wetting that child will get!" exclaimed Jane, looking up at the window as Mrs. Brant entered, and that lady awoke to the consciousness that a heavy April shower was beating against the panes. In her excitement she had hardly noticed the weather when she let Mr. Hamilton out.

"Your visitor didn't choose a very nice day for making calls," remarked Jane, who felt curious to know who the stranger was.

"The man and the day were a well-matched pair," retorted Mrs. Brant grimly; but the entrance of Jessica at that moment, wet and breathless from her run through the rain, gave both Mrs. Brant and Jane a fresh subject of thought, and Mr. Hamilton was forgotten in their eager efforts to dry Jessica and to persuade each other and her that she would certainly be laid up with a bad cold unless she did all that they recommended in the way of rubbing and changing clothes. This occupation was an immense relief to Mrs. Brant, and Jessica, who had a peculiar faculty for understanding her friends' moods, submitted with her usual easy good-nature to a good deal of unnecessary coddling.

In this way Mrs. Brant managed to work off her nervous impatience, or at least to keep it under control ; but it was a great relief to her when, as the shower slackened, she heard her husband's voice in the hall. Dr. Scott had stopped at Mr. Marshall's to tell them that he did not wish Jack to go home until the nature of Helen's illness was more clearly decided, and Mr. Brant, learning that he dreaded scarlet fever, had come over at once to inquire what he could do.

"The best thing for you to do," said his wife, "is to keep out of the way and look after Jack ; I don't want you to run any risk of carrying contagion ; but since you are here I must say that I'm awfully glad to see you. Come in here and listen to what I have to tell you," and she led the way into the parlor, where she related to him as accurately as she could remember all the conversation with her visitor.

"Apparently he is some unprincipled fellow who has got hold of certain facts from which he desires to make as much money as possible," said her husband. "You acted very wisely in giving him no satisfaction and in avoiding furnishing him any information."

"My fingers ached to give him a good shaking," exclaimed Mrs. Brant. "But there, let him go now ; he is not worth remembering. We must think about our poor cousin, for she certainly has troubles enough and to spare. I wonder if that wretched man will try to rig up some fresh stories about that poor Bertha, because her mother had to telegraph to her not to come home to-day."

"I doubt if he will attempt anything further," replied

Mr. Brant. "His object evidently was to obtain money, and failing in that he will probably turn his attention elsewhere. There is, however, some truth, I fear, in the tale of Mortimer's difficulties, as I have already learned from Jack that he is worried about some missing money."

"It just makes me sick to think that such a rascal has any chance to injure Mortimer," exclaimed Mrs. Brant; but her husband replied in his quiet tones:

"We have a stronger refuge than any that our weak arms can build to protect our friends. If we trust all in the hands of the Lord he will show us the way to do the best for our friends, and the most honest and kindly course for ourselves to pursue."

"I declare if I don't always need reminding," said his wife with a half-angry shake of her head. "I get riled, and then I get to thinking and planning at such a rate that I 'most forget to ask any help. But there is one thing that I never forget, and never shall as long as I've got any mind left," she added with a gleam of tears in her bright eyes, "and that is that the Lord spared you to me to keep me straight."

The white-haired husband and wife clasped hands with a fervor that could not have been equalled in the days of their courtship; and then with mutual unspoken consent they knelt in prayer for their sorely tried cousins. Even the unknown Bertha came in for a share of their sympathy and kindly feelings.

"I don't doubt that she is wayward and foolish," Mrs. Brant had said; "but she is young and pretty and has talent, and that kind are apt to show their faults more than the humdrum kind that nobody pays much attention to. At any rate I'm not going to take a spite at her at the bidding of any such creature as this Mr. Hamilton," and their petitions for her that she might have the divine protection and guidance were as earnest as for the members of the family who had shown them daily kindness.

Bertha stood more sorely in need of their prayers than they could see, for her willfulness was leading her into a false position to which, in her innocence, she was totally blind. Her eagerness to assist Kate in her efforts to keep Mark out of harm's way, made her far less careful than she would have been had she had no such apparently harmless motive for her association with him. She allowed him to walk home with her frequently when she met him on the street, and she also went to visit Kate much oftener than her aunt approved.

Miss Clive spoke to her seriously about the matter, but Bertha only answered rather indignantly that she was acting from the best of motives and was sure that her mother would not disapprove.

"Then, my dear, bring me your mother's own assurance that she approves," said Miss Clive.

"That is easily done, for I am going out there to-day," said Bertha lightly. "Now, auntie dear, don't look so solemn. As I told Mortimer when he began to preach to me, what good is our Christianity if we must be so busy keeping our own skirts out of the dust of suspicion that we can't lend a helping hand to a friend?"

"God forbid that we should be so selfish," replied Aunt Rachel in earnest tones that contrasted strongly with Bertha's petulant and almost flippant manner. "But, dear child, I must repeat what I have said before: we can't help others to do right if we are careless about ourselves. The more I desire to give aid, the closer I must live to the one strong Helper whose arm can never fail. The more I desire to teach others, the more diligently I must study that my own lessons may be learned aright. Bertha dear, I fear that it is your own amusement that is really what urges you on to companionship with those whom you knew that your mother did not desire as your intimate companions. You have no time for quiet thought and you go from church to church on the Sundays, simply to hear the finest music. Now you are letting yourself be drawn into constant companionship with young Mr. Willoughby. He walked home with you from Mrs. Davenant's yesterday morning, and he and Kate came in again in the evening. Don't you see that all this will give rise to comments?"

"I never listen to gossip," said Bertha, "and I don't think that people will dare to bring any to me."

"You foolish child," said her aunt, looking fondly at the pretty face that was now flushed with indignant pride; "I am not speaking of what people will say to you, but of what they will say about you."

"Well, anybody who knows me knows that I don't care one snap for Mark Willoughby's attentions," exclaimed Bertha, breaking into a merry laugh. "Mortimer has twice his sense and steadiness. No, no, Mr. Mark Willoughby must be content to seek admiration from girls who have not as good a brother as mine. He can't stand the comparison. Now I can't talk any more or I shall be late for Myrtle's lesson." With a saucy nod, Bertha kissed her aunt's perplexed face and vanished.

"I wish that she would give a little more time and sympathy to her own brother," sighed her aunt. "She admires him so much that she does not even see when he is bothered. Well, it is a comfort to think that they will both have a chance to talk over everything with their mother tonight."

Even as the words formed themselves in her mind, Miss

Halsey entered the room holding out to her a telegram. She tore it open nervously, for in her quiet life she was little used to telegrams, and she read :

Helen sick. Possibly contagious. Do not let Bertha come now.

"Poor child, poor child !" exclaimed the kind-hearted little aunt. "She will feel dreadfully worried and anxious. I must try to avoid startling her with the news."

Meanwhile Bertha was gayly pursuing her way to Mr. Davenant's. It was early when she arrived, and Mrs. Davenant came into the room with Myrtle and stopped for a little chat. Myrtle was fully recovered from even the most remote effects of her fall, but Mrs. Davenant's mind still ran on the danger and the wonderful escape of her darling, and she mentioned that she wished to thank in person the gentleman who had caught Myrtle from under the wheels.

"Myrtle does not know his name. She was too confused to catch it, but maybe you can tell me who it is," she said to Bertha. "Describe him, Myrtle dear."

The child's description, however, gave no clue to Bertha, who had never seen Mr. Brant, but she said, "Mortimer must know, and I will ask him."

Mrs. Davenant thanked her and the lesson went on uninterrupted by any more talk about outside matters ; but when it was over, Mrs. Davenant came into the room again and this time the musical evenings that Kate Willoughby was arranging were spoken of.

"I fear that Myrtle is too young, and I am too old to be classed among Kate's young people," said Mrs. Davenant merrily. "I think I must tell her that I claim the post of chaperon, for I am sure the music will be very enjoyable. She and Mark have excellent taste in musical matters. In fact I think that you must find them both quite congenial spirits," she added.

Whether it was the tone, or whether it was a slightly inquiring glance, Bertha could not tell, but something in Mrs. Davenant's speech made her recall her aunt's warning with an uncomfortable flush. Mrs. Davenant noticed the flush and instantly went on to make inquiries about another young lady who was to participate. She was far too kindly and too courteous to wish to embarrass the girl, but she had heard comments on the intimacy between the Willoughbys and the Winsteads and she drew her own inferences from Bertha's blush.

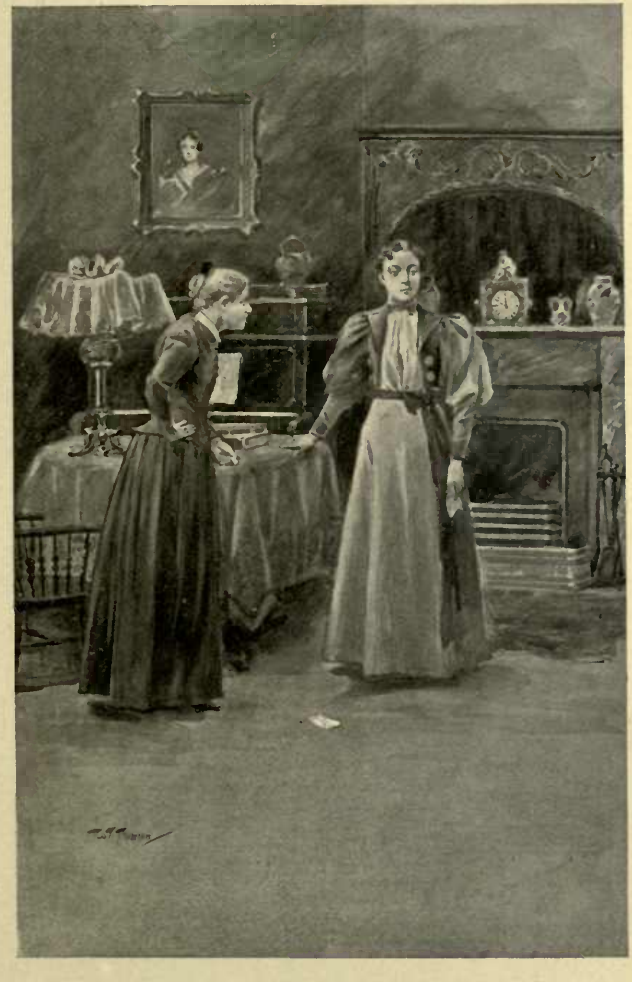
The girl herself was vexed with her own stupidity, and it did not mend matters that before she had gone a block from Mr. Davenant's door she met Mark Willoughby himself. But this time his manner was preoccupied and he soon excused himself on the plea of business that might take him out of town for a short time.

"I am going to be so greedy as to ask you to save the 'Moonlight Sonata' till my return," he said, making an effort to throw off his preoccupation. "I shall be back in time for the second *musicale.*"

Bertha promised, and was not at all sorry to see him lift his hat and turn down another street, leaving her to pursue her way home unattended. When she entered her aunt's room she noticed at once the anxious expression with which Miss Rachel greeted her, and her quick eye caught a glimpse of the telegraphic envelope, so there was nothing to do but to let her see the message.

She turned very pale as she read it.

"Auntie," she exclaimed, "I must go; I am not a baby



"'Auntie,' she exclaimed, 'I must go.'"

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to catch all childish ailments, and poor mamma must need me dreadfully."

"I think, dear, that it would only add to her anxiety if you went in disobedience to her express wish," said her aunt gently. "Wait till to-morrow. We shall no doubt have a letter then, and very likely we shall have much better news."

For a time Bertha was inclined to reject all her aunt's kind advice; but Miss Halsey happened to come in, and she remarked in her homely, sensible way:

"For the land's sake, don't go worrying yourself into a fever when it may be only chicken-pox. If you took that, though it's nothing to have, it would upset all your lessons; for none of your pupils would want you bringing it to them. Your mother is a wise woman, and you just wait till she sends you word to come."

The idea of running serious risk to bring help to her mother and Helen had seemed attractive to Bertha, but the thought of getting her face covered with ugly spots that were not in the least dangerous, lessened her ardor and she consented to follow her aunt's advice.

Bertha had to go in the afternoon to give another lesson, and when she returned Mortimer came home. He looked very weary and depressed, and as soon as he heard of the telegram he picked up his hat to hurry to the station.

"I believe that I have had all the diseases that children are expected to catch," he said, "so there is no danger in my going out to find out exactly what is the matter. Don't be alarmed if I am late in getting home, as I have to stop and see Mark Willoughby when I come back from Briarley."

"He is not in town," remarked Bertha.

"How do you know that?" asked Mortimer sharply.

"I saw him this morning, and he said that he could not be at the musicale next Tuesday, because he was going out of town on business,'' replied Bertha,

Mortimer flung down his hat with a whistle of dismay.

''There is some fate about it!'' he exclaimed bitterly. ''I can't get hold of Mark just when I want so much to see him.''

''I wish I had known,'' said Bertha. ''I could have told him that you were looking for him; but you did not tell me. You ought not to be so reserved with me.''

Mortimer made no reply, but picked up his hat again.

''Where are you going now?'' asked Bertha in an injured tone.

''Out to see mother and find out what's wrong with Helen,'' he answered shortly, and left the room.

For a little while after he left Bertha felt uncomfortable and cross. People did not seem to approve of her; and it was very necessary to her happiness that she should be not only approved of, but admired.

''I'll go to church with auntie on Sunday,'' she thought, as she went slowly to her own room; ''that will please her,'' and a bright idea suddenly struck her as she pondered over Mortimer's unusual depression. ''Poor boy, his necktie looked quite shabby, and I can set that right at all events, even if I can't get hold of Mark Willoughby for him.'' Pleased with this thought, she rummaged out her pieces of silk and set to work.

It really gratified Bertha to please others, and she was willing to take trouble to accomplish it, but she often did not have the discernment to get at the root of the matter. Miss Clive's desire for her dearly loved niece went deeper than the mere question of one morning's attendance at church ''to please her,'' and Mortimer's anxieties were far beyond the power of a new necktie to alleviate. But when

Bertha carried her work downstairs and sat chatting with bright affectionate speech and manners, while her deft finger stitched away at the pretty trifle for her brother, it was no wonder that the old ladies were charmed, and Bertha herself began to feel more satisfied with herself.

CHAPTER XIX

HAMILTON'S MISCHIEF-MAKING

MR. HAMILTON, when he left Merrivale Farm, was in a very unamiable frame of mind. Mr. Brant, when he assured his wife that she need not fear any further move on the part of that man, had failed to do justice either to the inventive faculties or the spite of the man in question. Robert Hamilton had made repeated efforts to work himself into the favor of Mr. Palmer, and his total lack of success he attributed solely to the counter influence of Mortimer Winstead. The truth was that Mr. Palmer had never mentioned the man nor asked his opinion of him ; but Hamilton was possessed of an overweening conceit that made him very slow to believe that any one might instinctively dislike or distrust him. Mortimer had only seen Hamilton once since his mother's warning, and then he had treated him with a cold politeness that annoyed Hamilton extremely, and he now returned to town firmly convinced that Mortimer had in some way forestalled him and had set Mrs. Brant against him.

"But I'll be even with you yet, my boy," he muttered. "You are not in Mr. Palmer's good graces now, and you will find yourself lower yet before I have done with you."

It was raining when he reached town, and he walked along the street feeling in very ill humor with himself and everything about him. Suddenly his attention was attracted to a lady and gentleman who were coming toward him. The umbrella that the gentleman held low to protect his companion from the rain hid their faces, but something in the gait and figure of the young man suggested to him Mark Willoughby.

Hamilton turned aside to look into a shop window, hoping thus to get a good look at them as they passed, without being himself observed. It was, as he had expected, Mark Willoughby, and his companion was a very pretty young girl. They seemed to be engaged in earnest conversation, but in spite of his utmost endeavors, Hamilton could not catch what they were saying, and he was on the point of continuing his own way down the street when he noticed that they had paused, and in another moment they came slowly back again. Their object was soon apparent, for Mark stopped a street car that was coming toward them, and helped his companion on board it. He did not, however, follow her himself, but came back to the sidewalk. Seeing him alone, Mr. Hamilton now went forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"Hello! you here?" said Mark with a slight frown.

"Yes, and I have some news for you," replied Hamilton.

"I hope it is good news this time," said Mark shortly.

"Come, come, man alive, don't be so surly!" exclaimed Hamilton. "I want to get to a dry place where I can talk to you without getting my death of cold. Come with me to Jim Benton's office."

With a half-unwilling grunt Mark followed him as he turned into a less-frequented street, and they soon reached the office in question, which belonged to one of Hamilton's friends. Nodding to his friend as he entered, Hamilton led the way to a corner where they were out of sight for any one entering the door, and could talk undisturbed. Here he proceeded to relate to Mark the story that he had already told Mrs. Brant about Mortimer Winstead.

"There is some mistake about it," said Mark decidedly. "That fellow is perfectly honest. If Palmer & Davenant have pitched on him as the thief, they are barking up the wrong tree, and no mistake."

"Well I don't know anything about that," said Hamilton indifferently. "I only look at the thing from your standpoint, and I see this: if Winstead goes out, you are the one who ought to go in."

"Is that your good news?" exclaimed Mark hotly. "So you think that I would be sneak enough to try to take Winstead's position from him. Now just let me tell you, that sort of dirty work may suit you, but it is not my way."

He spoke so contemptuously that Hamilton flushed, but quickly recovering his usual imperturbability said coldly:

"You have no control over Winstead's affairs. If Mr. Palmer chooses to turn him out and to put somebody else in the place, you can't prevent it. I thought, as soon as I heard that this place would be vacant soon, that it would be a good chance for you. I did not know but your father would like the idea of getting you in there. Of course I can see that your father and Palmer & Davenant don't care anything about me, in fact would rather not see me around; so I stopped now just to tell you of this and to say that if you like to keep quiet about me I am willing to keep out of your way. But then if you are so well fixed that you don't care about the place, all right. It will be a good opening for some other fellow."

He rose as he spoke, but Mark stopped him.

"You need not be in such a hurry," he said irritably. "You know well enough that I do want the place badly. It would be just the thing for me; and so much better a firm than Harvey & Blake that the old gentleman would take me to his bosom right away if he thought that I had got it."

"It all rests with yourself," said Hamilton, shrugging his shoulders carelessly. "By the way, who is that uncommonly pretty girl I saw you walking home with last evening?"

"Are you setting out to spy upon me?" demanded Mark fiercely.

"Not a bit of it, not a bit of it; it would not be worth my while. But I don't suppose that you monopolize the public streets," retorted Hamilton coolly. Then suddenly changing to a more genial tone he exclaimed: "See here, what is up? Here I come to do you a good turn, and I find you as cross as a bear with a sore head. If you are afraid of injuring your chances with Winstead's sister, if you take the place that her brother is fired out of, why just say so and let it alone."

Mark burst into a loud laugh. "Not much," he said contemptuously. "What ever put that notion into your head?"

"Oh, well, you go about with her a good deal, if it is true that the girl I saw you walking with last evening was Winstead's sister. I am only repeating what I hear said," returned Hamilton indifferently. "She is a pretty girl and no mistake."

"Not my style though," said Mark, turning down the corners of his mouth and tilting back his chair.

"Well, no. I prefer dark eyes and a little more 'go' myself," replied Hamilton in the same careless tone. "For instance, the little beauty that you put on the car just before I spoke to you."

"Will you hold your tongue? or am I going to have to punch your head to teach you manners?" growled Mark, bringing down his chair on all four feet, and leaning toward Hamilton with set mouth and an angry gleam in his eyes.

Hamilton jumped hastily to his feet; the wrathful face was too near his own, and a clenched hand looked dangerous.

"Good-bye; I see you are not in the mood for any rational conversation," he said stiffly, trying to conceal that his sudden movement was the result of fright.

Mark said nothing and Hamilton after going a step or two farther returned.

"I shall be obliged to deposit that check you gave me, as I am going out of town. I suppose you have the funds in bank to meet it now," he said. His tone was cool and careless, but there was a ring of spite in it and he watched Mark closely.

"No, I haven't," retorted the younger man. "But deposit it if you like. You can pay the protest charges and I'll face the row with the old man when he hears of it."

"Come, come, be reasonable, old fellow," said Hamilton, resuming his friendly tone. "You and I don't want to fight. It will only hurt us both, and there is nothing to be gained by it. If we hang together we shall get out of all the difficulties."

"Then tell me in three words what you want, and be done with it," said Mark sulkily. "But mind, I am not going to oust Winstead to please you or any other man."

"How you harp on that string! Why, man, he is out already. I tell you, at this very moment he is cudgeling his brains to find out what to take to next," said Hamilton impatiently.

"How do you know that?" asked Mark uneasily.

"Never you mind how, but remember this, I know it," replied his companion impressively. "Now the question is, are you going to take the good that the gods grant you and quietly slip into this vacant place? If you wish to do so then just remember this: from the time that you go out of that door there, I forget that I have seen you or held any communication with you for—suppose we say six weeks or two months. No one has seen us together in that time except Benton here and others who are safe, and of course you are equally sure that you have had no communication with me during that time."

"How about that check?" asked Mark gloomily.

"That check may stay where it is. With a regular salary coming in you can soon pay it off, and I would not mind trusting you a little longer. Mr. Palmer meant to raise Winstead's salary, and unless I am very much mistaken he will raise for you," said Hamilton speaking more cheerfully as he noted that Mark was nibbling the bait. "Later on, with your father's influence to back you, there is no knowing how high you may rise. Mr. Davenant is no good as a man of business and Mr. Palmer will soon find that he needs a live, active young man to be in with him. Now do you agree to this?"

"I suppose so," said Mark doubtfully.

"And will you promise to hold to it that you have had no communication with me, direct or indirect, for two months past? I must be sure of that," said Hamilton with a short laugh, "for I'm not going to help you out by vowing that I have had nothing to do with you, unless you hold up your end of the line."

"I understand; I promise," said Mark impatiently, and then he picked up his hat and umbrella and without another word went out.

"Now I have got you, my fine fellow," muttered Hamilton; "but I must work the mine quickly or I shall be caught yet. Winstead must get his dismissal within twenty-four hours."

He also went out, but he took his way by a rather circuitous route to Mr. Palmer's office. It was then close upon twelve o'clock, and Mortimer was just rising from his desk to go out to lunch. Hamilton, with perfect composure, asked if Mr. Palmer was in and said that he wished to have a few minutes' private conversation with him. Mr. Palmer, who was just coming out of the inner office, paused, feeling strongly inclined to say that he had an engagement and could not wait; but shrewdly guessing that it would only bring the man back again later on, he turned back and sat down. Hamilton followed him and closed the door between the offices. He noted with satisfaction that the sliding window was closed also. Then he began glibly:

"I understand, Mr. Palmer, that you have recently missed a small sum of money and I thought that you would doubtless be glad to get hold of any clue that might help you to discover the thief."

"Which means to say that you want to know what I will pay you for some information that you think you have got," interrupted Mr. Palmer curtly. "Well, sir——"

"I beg your pardon," interposed Hamilton with all the dignity that he could assume, "I had no intention of driving a bargain, and I have not heard that you have offered any reward for the conviction of the thief. I simply heard that you were annoyed at the difficulty of solving this mystery, and therefore I thought it only honorable to give you any clue that might assist you. What I have to show you may really be of no value. That is for you to decide."

Hamilton was undoubtedly clever in understanding how to take different men with whom he came in contact. If he had tried to impress Mr. Palmer with the importance of the information that he had to give, that gentleman would in all probability have refused even to listen to him, considering that it was a mere scheme to extort money; but now

Mr. Palmer hesitated. He would really have been willing to give a good sum for positive information that would remove the ugly doubt that would intrude into his mind concerning Mortimer's share in the loss of the fifty-dollar note. Hamilton observed his hesitation and continued :

"I merely intended to show you a note that was sent to me and to tell you the circumstances under which I received it." As he spoke he pulled out of his pocket a crumpled half-sheet of paper which he laid upon the desk.

Mr. Palmer picked it up and read :

I can fix it. Come to me this evening and I can let you have the money.
March 31, 1880. M. W.

The words were very hastily scribbled, but the handwriting was unmistakably Mortimer Winstead's, and the paper bore the heading of Palmer & Davenant's firm.

"Well, what of this?" asked Mr. Palmer harshly.

"That was given to me on the last day of March by Mortimer Winstead's young brother," said Mr. Hamilton. "I had lent him money on his note and I reminded him that it was due on the thirty-first of March, but he said that he could not pay it. Yet that morning he sent me this note. Certainly," continued Hamilton, "I could not well afford to be out of a hundred dollars and I was glad enough to find that he could pay it."

"You received that amount from Mortimer Winstead the last day of March?" inquired Mr. Palmer.

"Yes," replied Hamilton ; "and of course I returned the note to him."

"Stop a moment," said Mr. Palmer, and rising he opened the door and looked out as if seeking Mortimer, but the stool before his desk was vacant ; he had already gone to his lunch.

"Mr. Winstead avoided speaking to me in the presence of his friends," remarked Hamilton. "I think that he did not wish to have it known that he had borrowed of me."

"Will you leave this with me?" asked Mr. Palmer, taking no notice of this remark, and tapping the paper that he still held in his hand.

"Certainly," replied Hamilton. "It is of no consequence to me now that I am paid. I brought it to you to make what use you pleased of it. But I think that it is not unlikely that Mr. Winstead will deny that he sent it to me, as he seemed always inclined to hide his dealings with me."

Mr. Palmer only bowed. He could not bring himself to say anything to a man he so thoroughly distrusted and disliked; but the case did look black against Mortimer and he felt sore and angry.

Hamilton however was well satisfied with his morning's work.

"I began with a failure but I have ended with a success here," he muttered as he went out again into the street. "The poison will work and another twenty-four hours will see Winstead out of that office. But it is hard luck that I could not get anything for the information. If I had been as stupid as some men I know, I would have tried it and made a dead failure, for he would never have listened to a word. Now the question is how to raise enough to keep me going until I can strike Mark for more cash."

CHAPTER XX

MORE MYSTERY

MR. PALMER had not yet decided what course to pursue when Mortimer returned to the office. He delayed questioning Mortimer ; but while he was ready to call Hamilton a liar he could not help thinking how many temptations there were to assail a young man fresh from country life and to lead him into extravagance, and also how helpless he was likely to be in the hands of a man like Hamilton. At last when it was near the time for leaving the office, he sauntered out to Mortimer's desk.

"By the way," he said pleasantly, "do you know that man Hamilton who has been running in lately to see me?"

"I have seen him here, sir," replied Mortimer.

"I don't think much of the man," said Mr. Palmer. "Has he been trying to talk you into any of his schemes?"

"No, sir ; I have seen him only when he came here inquiring for you, and I was too busy to pay much attention to him," replied the young man.

"You had not met him at any other times then?" asked Mr. Palmer.

"I think that he walked up to the station with me one day, when he happened to be leaving the office at the same time that I did," replied Mortimer, flushing a little under Mr. Palmer's keen look and repeated questioning. "But I did not like him any better than you do, sir."

"Ah, then you did not have any dealings with him," said Mr. Palmer.

"None whatever," replied Mortimer confidently.

"Is that your writing?" asked his employer, suddenly drawing out the sheet of paper that Hamilton had left with him.

Mortimer flushed crimson, but he answered firmly:

"Yes, sir."

"Did you send it to Hamilton?" asked Mr. Palmer.

"No, sir," replied Mortimer.

"To whom did you send it?" queried the gentleman.

For a moment Mortimer hesitated, then he replied perfectly courteously: "I would rather not tell you, sir."

"Oh, all right," rejoined Mr. Palmer, and he thrust the paper back in his pocket and went out, leaving Mortimer in a very uncomfortable state of doubt as to what it all could mean.

Mr. Palmer went straight to Mr. Lindsay's office. Evidently he had been there before, for as soon as he entered Mr. Lindsay, who was reaching for his hat and coat, sat down again, asking:

"Have you found the bill under your ledgers or tucked into some stray envelope?"

"No," said Mr. Palmer; "but a man has been in today to see me about the matter, the last man that I should have expected to see. It was Robert Hamilton himself. Now I have come to ask you what Mr. Mark Willoughby has to say. Have you seen him?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Lindsay. "I met him in the street about two o'clock. It is hard to find him, now that he has no settled business."

"Well, what did he say?" asked Mr. Palmer impatiently.

"I asked him to whom he sent Jack Winstead with a note, and he denied point-blank that he had sent him to anybody. I asked him if he had seen Hamilton lately, and he said no, not for a long time,'' replied Mr. Lindsay.

''I had better see him myself,'' said Mr. Palmer rising. ''Kate can tell me where to find him.''

''No, no,'' said the lawyer. ''He is out of town. He was on his way to the station when I met him, and he was in such a hurry to catch his train that I had no time to explain to him what our suspicions were ; but he positively denied that he had written a note to anybody that day ; and he also said that Jack came in a tremendous hurry and tore off again as if he were running for a wager.''

''Now I think of it, Mr. Davenant said that he gave the boy a quarter for carrying his message so quickly,'' remarked Mr. Palmer. ''That does not look as though he could have delayed to do errands for anybody else. It begins to look like a bad business.'' Then he showed Mr. Lindsay Mortimer's note and repeated to him what Hamilton had said. ''I have no desire to be hard upon these boys, and I should be more than sorry to be unjust to them,'' he continued, ''but all this looks very odd, and to let anything of this sort go would be doing the whole family a poor kindness. Far better that a young man should find his first step in evil ways a painful experience. I think that Mortimer is in the main a good fellow and I can see how he may have been tempted when he got into the clutches of this man Hamilton, who is, I am convinced, a complete swindler ; but the best thing for him will be to pull him up short now. Now I have thought it all over carefully and I mean to do just this: if the fifty dollars is returned he can stay and no more will be said about it. If it is not repaid he must leave our employ. I don't want, out of regard for his family, to make any public scandal ; but he must be made to smart for it or it will simply be an encouragement for him to try the same thing again." Mr. Palmer's look of stern decision did not encourage any further words, but Mr. Lindsay hazarded the remark:

"I don't see how that man's presence in the office can be explained."

"It was only Jack Winstead who saw him," replied Mr. Palmer curtly, "and the man or boy who will steal will lie to hide it."

"At all events wait till I find out from Mortimer whether he really did send this note to Hamilton," urged Mr. Lindsay. "You see there is no name to show to whom it was addressed."

"I have already questioned him. He denies that he sent the note to Hamilton, but when I asked him to whom it was sent he refused to tell me. I suppose he was sharp enough to suspect that if he gave me any other name I would hunt up that person and prove the truth of his assertion. No, it is evidently a made-up affair between those boys, and the more I think of it the more it grates on me. You can tell him my decision if you are going to see him, and tell him that I give him a week to refund the money," and Mr. Palmer rose and took up his hat.

"One moment," urged Mr. Lindsay again. "Have you considered that you will probably only be forcing the money from his mother? If he paid over one hundred dollars to Hamilton, as he says, Mortimer cannot have anything left."

"I am sorry for that; but it must be done," repeated Mr. Palmer obstinately. "I am really doing a kindness to Mrs. Winstead in making Mortimer feel that he has got himself into a hole. As for the money, he can repay it to her, if he remains with us and reforms his ways. If not, he will get into worse scrapes that will cost her dearer than this. Mark my words."

Mr. Lindsay made no reply, and Mr. Palmer said good-evening ; his portly figure darkened the narrow doorway for a moment, and then disappeared down the steep stairway.

After he had gone Mr. Lindsay sat for a few moments tapping the desk with his fingers thoughtfully ; then he too rose to his feet, shook himself, looked at the time, and went out locking the door after him. When he reached the street he again paused a moment irresolutely, and then instead of turning homeward he started in the direction of Miss Halsey's boarding house. He had not gone far when he met the very man he was in search of, for Mortimer came around a corner, hurrying on his way to the station.

"Stop a bit," said Mr. Lindsay. "If you are not in too big a hurry I want to talk to you about this Palmer-Davenant affair."

"Something is wrong with Helen and I was going home to inquire," said Mortimer. "But I can wait over a train as they are not expecting me."

"Then come back to my office. That will be better than talking in the street or in your boarding house," said Mr. Lindsay. Although Mortimer looked worn and haggard, there was something frank and honest about him that made the little lawyer feel that it must be only that appearances were against him.

Mortimer was too eager to wait till they reached the office and he asked as they walked along:

"Have you learned anything? Have you found out who that man was?"

"No," said Mr. Lindsay ; "I saw Mark Willoughby."

"Well, did you ask him who the fellow was that Jack took the note to?" demanded Mortimer impatiently.

"Yes; but he says that he sent no note by Jack," replied Mr. Lindsay.

Mortimer started. "Does Mark say that?" he exclaimed fiercely. "Then Mark Willoughby lies."

"Hush, hush," interrupted Mr. Lindsay warningly. "Wait till we get to the office to talk over this quietly."

"I don't care where we are!" replied Mortimer angrily. "I won't listen quietly to any one who tells me that Jack says what is not true. I've known him all his life, and he was always as honest as the day. I can't say as much for Mark Willoughby, though I never till now thought that he would tell downright lies."

To Mr. Lindsay's great relief, they were now at the door of the building in which he had his office and he hurried his indignant young friend upstairs.

"Now," he said, when they were safely ensconced in the privacy of his dingy little room, "I want you to listen to me quietly," and he proceeded to relate to him what Mr. Palmer had said. "You see for yourself that it is an awkward tangle, and any mystery on your part only adds to the ugly look of the muddle. If you have been doing anything foolish don't hesitate to own up. And now I want you to tell me frankly to whom you sent that note."

Mortimer had listened quietly as his friend had begged him to do; but his angry eyes and tightly set lips showed that he was exercising no little self-repression. Now he drew a long breath and answered promptly:

"Certainly; I am not bound by any promise, and I will tell you. I sent it to Mark Willoughby."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Lindsay. "Had you borrowed of him?"

"No, he wanted to borrow of me," replied Mortimer.

Mr. Lindsay gave a low, short whistle. Even he was startled; it seemed so preposterous that the son of a man as rich as Mr. Willoughby should be supposed to have any need to borrow of a poor clerk in his uncle's office. But he only asked:

"How then could it have gotten into Hamilton's hands? Mark told me to-day that he had not seen Hamilton in the last six weeks or two months."

"You must ask Mark to explain that," said Mortimer wearily, pushing back the hair from his forehead.

"It is unfortunate that Mark went out of town to-day, so that it is impossible to ask him until he returns," said Mr. Lindsay drily.

"I can't help that," said Mortimer, who noticed at once the subtle change in Mr. Lindsay's tone. He was beginning to see with painful clearness the difficulties in which he had involved himself; and his anger was now giving way to a dreadful feeling of loneliness and depression that made him long to be alone to fight it out with himself.

Mr. Lindsay sat a few moments in deep thought, then he turned again with a kindly air to Mortimer.

"See here, my boy," he said earnestly, "I know that young men will get into scrapes, even the best of them, and I want to help you out of this bad box that you are in now. In fact everybody wants to see you cleared."

"No," said Mortimer harshly, "both Mr. Palmer and Mr. Davenant suspect me. I can see it. Mr. Davenant was cut because I showed up his carelessness about the gold piece, and Mr. Palmer—well, I think that he stood by me till to-day; but I was not going to get Mark into trouble if I could avoid it by holding my tongue when he asked to whom I sent the note."

"Yes, I own that Mr. Palmer thinks that things look pretty bad," said Mr. Lindsay. "But he does not want to drive you into a hole and destroy your reputation. In fact, he says that if the fifty dollars is replaced, everything shall go on the same and no more shall be said about it. So now I want you to confide in me, and we will try to straighten it all out without worrying your mother."

The kindly tone had almost upset Mortimer ; but the information that Mr. Palmer expected him to repay the money and the obvious intimation that Mr. Lindsay himself was prepared to hear something in the nature of a confession, again aroused his indignation.

"You have heard all that I have to say," he replied in a voice that surprised himself, it sounded so cold in comparison with the conflicting feelings that raged within him. "Now I must hurry or I shall miss the next train. I'm—hem—much obliged to you for all this information," and he seized his hat and bolted out of the room, glad of any excuse to get out into the fresh air of the street, where the rain was again falling and a keen wind was rising.

Mr. Lindsay beat a lively tattoo with his fingers on his desk and sat for some time in perplexed thought before he again locked up his office and took his way homeward.

He had come too often in contact with the seamy side of human nature to be greatly amazed if Mortimer Winstead were the one to blame for the missing money; but notwithstanding, he felt most heartily sorry for the young man; and the thought of Mrs. Winstead's misery made him give himself a little shivery shake as he put up his umbrella, which he quickly attributed to the wind and rain and stepped out more briskly over the wet pavements.

CHAPTER XXI

MORTIMER FINDS A HELPER

MORTIMER'S visit home did not bring him comfort. He could not see his mother, as she was in Helen's room, and Jane told him that the doctor had said the child had diphtheritic sore throat, and he wished the utmost caution observed to prevent any one but her nurse from coming in contact with her. There was a bad case of diphtheria in the village, and the doctor feared that Helen might have taken the disease from this other child. He was always very particular in cases of contagious disease to enjoin strict quarantine ; but he was often thwarted by the ignorance and carelessness of the families of his patients. It was therefore a great satisfaction to him to find that Mrs. Winstead obeyed all his directions with intelligent and scrupulous exactness.

Jack and Mr. Brant were still at Mr. Marshall's. Mrs. Marshall had insisted that they should remain for the present, and as Mr. Marshall had business just at this time that needed his attention and might involve an absence over one or possibly two Sundays, Mr. Brant offered to preach for him and thus relieve him from the necessity of hurrying home each Sunday.

Mortimer thought of going over to Mr. Marshall's when he found that he could not see his mother, but he felt too disheartened and wretched. Jane advised him not to come into the house at all. Jessica and Mrs. Brant were up in her sitting room, busy with the household mending, and he told Jane not to disturb them, as he had to take the next train back to town.

"Tell Jessica to write every day and let us know how Helen is," he said, and then he took his lonely way back to the station.

It was half-past eight o'clock before he got back to Miss Halsey's, and he let himself in quietly with his latch key and stole upstairs only longing to get to his own room. He heard Bertha's voice chatting gayly to Miss Halsey and her sister in the parlor as he stole softly past the closed door, and he supposed that his aunt was with them. He was too weary and miserable to care for anything to eat, and he told himself that he did not want to have to talk to any one; but all the same there came over him as he threw himself on the bed in his little room an almost overwhelming sensation of loneliness. Helen had always been the pet of the family, and her illness was in itself a great anxiety to Mortimer, who had little knowledge of illness and therefore was full of vague terrors.

Then the thought that whatever might be before him, his reputation and his usefulness were blighted, seemed to sap all his energy and hope. And again the remembrance of the falsehood and deceit of the man he had tried to befriend roused him to fierce indignation. He was so absorbed in the painful intensity of his own bitter reflections that he did not hear the light footstep that followed him slowly up the stairs, and he was startled when a gentle hand was laid on his arm. Thinking that it was Bertha, whose anxiety to hear about Helen had caused her to watch for his return, he sat up to get it over and be left free again; but he was more surprised to see by the dim light from the entry the figure of his Aunt Rachel.

"Is it anything very bad, my boy?" she asked kindly.

"Yes, bad enough, for they are afraid of diphtheria," answered Mortimer drearily.

Miss Clive started, and he could feel her hand, that still lay on his arm, close in a tight clutch ; but in another moment her kind voice spoke gently :

"I am very sorry ; but we must not be downcast, my boy ; we have a strong Helper to whose loving care we can confide the dear child."

Mortimer made no reply. The words sounded so hollow and meaningless to him that he was surprised at himself.

"Did you see your mother?" asked his aunt.

"No. Jane told me that she was quarantined in Helen's room," he answered in the same dull, dreary tone. "But I left word for Jessica to write every day ; and she is a good, trusty little soul. We can depend on hearing from her."

"Then you could not get any talk with your mother ; and I know that you wanted badly to see her," said Miss Clive. "Don't be worried ; I have not been trying to find out anything, my boy ; but I could not help seeing that you were in trouble, and if you like to tell me I'll try my best to help you out."

"It isn't anything that I can tell," said Mortimer with a gasp, as he thought that if he was to be turned off from Palmer & Davenant's everybody would soon know. "I am in trouble, but it isn't my fault, and all I can do is just to bear it quietly till I get a chance to make the one suffer who ought to bear the blame." His tone grew very hard and bitter, but his aunt's voice was still gentle and encouraging, and in the darkness of the room he could not see the look of pain on her face as she answered him :

"If you cannot tell me, there is always One who knows without any telling, and who has always the best of help waiting for those who ask it."

"Oh, Aunt Rachel, don't talk to me just now! I can't listen quietly when I have been made to suffer for other people's wrong-doing," exclaimed Mortimer impatiently.

"Well, my boy, I would far rather hear that you were suffering for the wrong-doing of others than from your own," replied his aunt with a little attempt at loving gayety; but when he buried his face again in the pillow with a long-drawn breath that was almost a groan, she quickly added with the deepest sympathy, "but it hurts me too much to think of you as suffering at all. Don't say that I must not talk to you, dear. If I cannot help you out of your difficulties it will not worry you to know that I am sorry." She spoke so anxiously and lovingly that Mortimer felt ashamed of his impatience and he reached out and felt for her hand in the darkness.

"I would not be in any trouble at all," he said at last, drawn on to speak by the warm, tight clasp of her hand and the consciousness that she was waiting eagerly to know of something that she could do for him, "none at all, if it were not that other people won't speak the truth. There is one who could set the matter straight at once if he would do it. Mother warned me against him, and I ought to have been wiser, but I thought that he was honest in his friendship, at least."

"May I tell you what I think, and may I tell you of whom I think you are speaking?" asked his aunt.

"Oh, there is no need to make any secret about that. I am talking of Mark Willoughby," said Mortimer with the bitterness in his tone that each mention of Mark's name aroused in him since he had heard of Mark's assertion that Jack did not speak the truth.

"If anything that Mark Willoughby has said or done has gotten you into trouble, you must let Mark know it," said Miss Rachel decidedly. "He is a weak young man, but he is not bad."

"Weak!" exclaimed Mortimer scornfully. "That is the last thing that I should call him."

"Trust me, it is true," replied Miss Rachel. "He has no strong principle, but he is kind-hearted. I should feel safe in saying that he would not willingly injure you; but I would not answer for it that he might not be led into telling a lie, or giving countenance to some sharp trick if a rascal persuaded him, and if he did not see that it was likely to injure any one that he cared about. That is why I call him weak, and people like that make dangerous friends."

"I meant to have nothing more to say to Mark; but if you are right it would be worth while to see him and get him to explain a part of this muddle that only he can explain," said Mortimer thoughtfully.

"I think that it would be your wisest plan," replied his aunt. "But now before you go any farther let me give you a little word of advice; don't take one step without confiding all your hopes and plans to the Lord, and asking his guidance. Do not, because an earthly friend fails you, cast aside the only never-failing Friend."

"I have tried so hard to keep straight, and it does seem hard that I should have suspicion cast on me when many fellows who do far more to deserve suspicion get off all right," said Mortimer.

"Have you asked his guidance in all that you have been doing lately?" asked Miss Clive. Mortimer made no reply, and she did not seem to expect any, for she rose to her feet as if prepared to leave the room. Then she delayed a moment and whispered in his ear: "'Oh, tarry thou the Lord's leisure: be strong, and he shall comfort thine heart, and put thou thy trust in the Lord.'"

She did not wait to say another word ; but he felt a light kiss on his forehead and then he saw her figure going out into the dim entry.

"I believe that she does just that every day of her life," he muttered to himself, and to his own surprise the feelings of resentment and the terrible depression that took possession of him when he was not full of resentment, seemed to have lost their hold on him. Mark's absence and the delay necessary in getting any help from him, still weighed heavily on Mortimer's mind ; but he was able to face the future more bravely. Any one looking into his room would have seen him still lying on his bed with his face buried in his pillow as his aunt had found him ; but it was words of prayer and no longer words of bitter anger that filled his heart.

Downstairs Miss Clive paused for a moment in her own room before going down to the parlor, and it was a short and earnest prayer that went up from her heart. The words were few : "O God, give me the right words to speak to these dear children, and show me how to lead them closer to thee." But they were almost painful in their intensity, and such a spirit never asks unheeded, nor fails to receive a reply.

CHAPTER XXII

FOLLOWING THE CLUE

BERTHA was greatly distressed when she learned the serious nature of Helen's illness ; but a letter from Jessica the following day, in which she wrote that the doctor spoke hopefully, seemed to cheer her wonderfully, and she went out to her lessons in her usual bright spirits.

"It is a lesson to me, just to see in what a real Christian spirit she takes this," said Miss Rebecca Halsey, who had a nervous and timid disposition. Miss Clive made no reply, for she feared that Bertha's cheerfulness had no such firm foundation ; and so it proved, for that very evening Bertha began to complain to her aunt of Mortimer's grave face and quiet manner.

"One would think that Helen was really dangerously ill," she said impatiently. "I am sure I feel as badly as any one that dear little Helen is ill at all, but I don't carry about such a long face as Mortimer. He is so dull too that one can hardly get him interested in anything. He knows that I am interested in those *musicales* at the Willoughbys' ; but when I speak to him about them he hardly hears me. At least he gives the shortest possible answers."

Miss Clive had noticed that Mortimer shrank from confiding to Bertha any of his anxieties, but she could not now refrain from saying :

"I think that Mortimer has business troubles to worry him ; and I am sure that he is bothered by Mark Willoughby's absence from town just now."

"If he would only confide in me," said Bertha, with a trace of asperity in her tone, "I am sure that it would be better for him as well as more considerate for me."

Her aunt recognized the ring of offended pride in her speech, and she sighed, for she knew well that this was not the spirit that would win Mortimer's confidence. A little real sisterly sympathy would have been a boon to Mortimer now, for matters did not improve, though he was making a brave fight to keep patiently and steadily at his work.

Mr. Lindsay had nothing satisfactory to tell Mr. Palmer, when that gentleman called at his office the day after his interview with Mortimer. Indeed, all the information that Mr. Lindsay had to give only served, as he had foreseen, to confirm the bad impression that Mr. Palmer had received from Mortimer's refusal to say to whom he had sent the note.

"He has picked out Mark Willoughby's name because Mark is out of town and cannot be got at just now to deny any story that he chooses to invent," Mr. Palmer said coldly; "but he cannot humbug me with any such tale as that Mr. Willoughby's son, who has an ample allowance from his father, would want to borrow of a young clerk with nothing but a salary of fifty dollars a month."

Mr. Lindsay was on the point of suggesting that sometimes the very fact of being the son of a rich man made it the more likely that a young fellow might get into scrapes where he badly needed money to help him out, but the remembrance that Mark was Mr. Palmer's nephew made him keep silent. It was true that the little lawyer himself secretly doubted the truth of Mortimer's story; but nevertheless he meant to do all that he could to prevent trouble and disgrace to the Winstead family, and he rightly judged that to make Mr. Palmer indignant with himself was not the best way to attain his object. He decided to see Mrs. Winstead, and to get from Jack an accurate account of that morning's proceedings, and also as clear a description as the boy could give of the man whom he had met twice on the morning of the thirty-first of March.

With this object in view he went out as soon as Mr. Palmer left his office and took the next train to Briarley. He had forgotten Helen's illness and was therefore surprised when Mrs. Brant opened the door to him and informed him that Mrs. Winstead could not see him, as she did not leave the room of her sick child.

"But if you have come with any tidings about this trouble that her son has got into, please come in and speak to me," said Mrs. Brant. "I have heard all about the matter, and I am very anxious to know how I can help her."

Mr. Lindsay, thus invited, followed her into the parlor; and he told her that nothing had as yet been discovered as to the real culprit.

"Then I will tell you just how it is," said Mrs. Brant. "Mr. Palmer is just as mad as a man always gets when he loses money and thinks that he has been cheated; and as there is nobody else for him to go for, he will end by getting mad with Mortimer and thinking that he took it." She paused and nodded her head sagely, while Mr. Lindsay wondered much what was coming next and held his tongue. "Now," she continued, "I need not tell you, Mr. Lindsay, that Mortimer did not touch that money any more than you or I did. But I want to know just what Mr. Palmer thinks and says."

"Well, madame," said Mr. Lindsay, "I think that as you know all the particulars, it would be better to explain to you Mr. Palmer's opinion and his decision. I must say that things look black for Mortimer. He made a great mistake in not speaking frankly to Mr. Palmer when he questioned him. The result is that Mr. Palmer feels that there was some deception on Mortimer's part."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Brant sharply. "Mr. Palmer just wants his money back and he is mad because he can't get it."

"No," said Mr. Lindsay; "Mr. Palmer does not mind the money itself, which is a comparatively insignificant amount to him; but he feels, as I said, that there has been some wrong-doing, and he thinks that Mortimer ought to have a warning. That is why he decides that Mortimer ought to repay it."

"I knew it," cried Mrs. Brant triumphantly. "But if he gets his money, what then?" she added shrewdly.

"Then nothing more will be said about the matter; otherwise he intends to discharge Mortimer," replied Mr. Lindsay, who had dreaded a feminine outburst of tears and wrath and was glad to have the explanation off his mind.

"Well now, Mr. Lindsay," said Mrs. Brant impressively, "I want you just to tell Mr. Palmer that he is going to get his money. You needn't look so surprised, for I have it. My son Felix has sent me fifty dollars out of his savings—he is earning right smart now—and I mean to use it to pay off Mr. Palmer and get Mortimer set right. I had it laid by to pay Mr. Brant's doctor's bill; but Mrs. Winstead said that she was going to pay that, and then when we spoke to Dr. Scott he said he didn't charge ministers, and there was no bill."

"That is a good deal for you to lose," said Mr. Lindsay. "You have already shown a very friendly feeling in the matter of the will, but your son might be vexed if he knew that you had used his savings in this way."

"I guess Felix is still my son if he is six feet tall, and he hasn't yet got to the size or the age when he is going to dictate to me," retorted Mrs. Brant with a little flash of independence. "And I would be ashamed to think that he would feel so mean toward people who have been so kind to us ; so you will just please not to suppose anything like that about him."

Mr. Lindsay with difficulty suppressed a smile. It was evident that this spunky little woman was used to ruling over her quiet husband and over her son, but there was no denying that it was a thoroughly kind and honest heart that prompted her rulings.

He apologized for his blunder and then suggested that he would like to see Jack and make further inquiries of him as to the man whom he had seen in the office.

"You will have to go to Mr. Marshall's then," said Mrs. Brant, "for we don't let him come here ; but wait a minute, and I'll give you that money to take to Mr. Palmer, for he mightn't like to have me come up to his house, seeing as there is diphtheria here."

"There is no hurry about that," said Mr. Lindsay. "The delay of a day or two is of no consequence to Mr. Palmer, and I may learn something from Jack that will set me on the track of this man." With these words and a message of sympathy for Mrs. Winstead and the sick child, Mr. Lindsay took his leave and went to Mr. Marshall's.

Jack was busy studying under Mr. Brant's supervision. He had been making very rapid progress since Mr. Brant had undertaken the work of coaching him, and Mr. Brant was becoming very much interested in his bright pupil. The books were laid aside, however, and the whole story of Jack's doings on the last day of March was gone over for Mr. Lindsay's benefit.

Jack said that as he rang the bell at Mr. Willoughby's the door opened and Mr. Mark Willoughby stepped out. Jack at once gave him the note that Mortimer had written so hastily. The young man took it and went back into the house, and the servant who came in answer to the ring said that Mr. Willoughby was not at home. Jack was just turning away when Mr. Mark Willoughby came out again in a great hurry, and pointing to a man who had passed on the opposite side of the street, thrust a paper into Jack's hand and asked him if he would run after that man and give it to him.

"He was just turning the corner and I had to make good time to catch him," said Jack, "but I saw that it was the man I had met at the office. I caught him before he had gone more than half a block down the other street, and I gave him the paper and said that Mr. Mark Willoughby had sent it."

"You are sure that you said that?" asked Mr. Lindsay.

"Oh, yes," replied Jack. "Then when I went back to the corner I saw Mark Willoughby still standing on his doorstep, and I just nodded to him that it was all right and made about the liveliest running to get back to Mr. Davenant before he should get impatient."

Mr. Lindsay then inquired particularly about the appearance of the man whom Jack had seen thus twice, and from the description he felt convinced that it was Hamilton; but he was careful to give no hint of his suspicion until he should have more ground to support it. The whole affair, told in Jack's boyish, straightforward style, bore the stamp of truth, and Mr. Lindsay began to think that there was some deeply laid scheme to ruin Mortimer, in which Hamilton and Mark were both implicated.

Mr. Guy Atherton was in the office when he returned to town, and to him Mr. Lindsay told what he had learned, for to him he felt that he could safely give vent to his indignation at the dastardly plot, as he called it, of young Willoughby.

"I think that you are mistaken there," said Guy thoughtfully. "I don't believe that Mark is as bad as that; and besides, if what I hear is true, he would not be likely to wish to injure Mortimer Winstead."

"Oh, I have no faith in his professions of friendship, if that is what you mean," said Mr. Lindsay. "Words are cheap."

"I did not mean that," replied Guy, playing nervously with a pen. "Of course, after what I hear of Willoughby's attentions to Miss Winstead, I should not suppose that he would wish to injure her brother."

Mr. Lindsay gave a low whistle, and cast one keen glance at his partner. Something in the young man's face warned him to be careful what he said, and he only remarked:

"I have heard nothing of this. You know I am a staid old fogy, Guy, and don't go out among the young people as you do."

"Well, well, let that go," said Guy impatiently. "I am thinking about Hamilton, as you call him. I wish that I could get a good look at him."

"He gets his mail at Jim Benton's office, and he is supposed to be agent for some mining company in Colorado," said Mr. Lindsay. "I learned that much about him, but when I asked Benton where Hamilton's office was, he laughed and said he guessed it was in his hat."

"Does Benton know where he lives?" asked Guy.

"If he does he won't tell. He said somewhere out of town, and that is vague enough in all conscience," replied Mr. Lindsay. "If he is really responsible for the loss of the fifty dollars, it was a pretty brazen game to go straight to the office to see Mr. Palmer about it."

"It is those risky games that will often serve the turn, if a rogue has cheek enough to carry it through coolly," said Guy sententiously. "Nobody saw this mysterious visitor at the office except Jack."

"And the office boy," corrected Mr. Lindsay, "I forgot to tell you that the office boy says that it was not Mr. Appleby who came in early that morning."

"Are you willing that I should have a talk with some of these people?" asked Guy. "I am sure that if Mark knew the plight Mortimer is in he would speak out and explain the whole business."

"I don't believe that he would," said Mr. Lindsay, positively; "and I'll tell you what I heard from Benton. He says that Mr. Palmer wants Mortimer's place to give it to Mark."

"I don't believe that," said Guy decidedly. "And even if Mr. Palmer would do such a mean thing, Mark would not have the place if he knew that he was getting it in such a sneaking fashion."

Guy spoke so hotly that Mr. Lindsay pursed up his lips and made no reply. He only remarked:

"Of course I shall be very glad if you can get any clue out of the muddle. Talk to whom you please as long as you are cautious. I don't want Hamilton bringing suit for slander against us."

"Never fear, I'll be careful," and with these words Guy rose to go out.

"Young people are forever in hot water," muttered Mr. Lindsay to himself when he was left alone. "Who would have thought that Guy, who needs a rich wife to start him well, would take a fancy to Bertha Winstead? But if she has Mark Willoughby in tow he may as well get over the fancy, for Mark has the advantage of him in money and good looks, whatever else he may lack ; and those are the two points that girls look out for in a husband.''

CHAPTER XXIII

BERTHA TRIES TO HELP

BERTHA was so much absorbed in practising for the *musicale* that she had very little time to fret over Mortimer's grave looks; and in spite of her aunt's words she made no effort to win Mortimer's confidence. A day or two before the evening which had been set for the first *musicale* she stopped to see Kate, and was surprised to learn that Kate had not arranged for it to take place on the evening they had planned.

"I think it is a pity to put it off," said Bertha. "Of course your brother is away, but he expected that he would come in for the second evening. He told me so himself."

"I was glad that he did go away just now, and give me a good excuse for postponing the whole affair," said Kate impulsively. "I have no heart for it at all while you are in such trouble. Mark will feel dreadfully worried about it, for your brother Mortimer was such a good friend to Mark."

"What can you mean?" asked Bertha in amazement. "Helen is not so very ill as all that."

Kate saw too late the blunder that she had made. She would gladly have turned off to other subjects; but Bertha's suspicions were fully roused, and to all Kate's kindly inquiries about her mother and Helen, she only replied by urging her to tell her what was wrong with Mortimer. At last she succeeded in drawing from Kate enough to show her how very serious the matter was for Mortimer; but her vexation was greater than her sympathy. For the first moment she felt almost stunned, but her usual self-control did not desert her, and she quietly asked when Mark was expected home, and when the *musicale* was to come off.

"Mark did not expect to get back before late in the week," replied Kate ; "but I had a line from him to-day, saying that he might come by the four o'clock express on Monday."

"Very well," said Bertha lightly ; "don't put off another *musicale* on our account. This matter will be settled before Monday. It is only some mistake."

Kate had only spoken about the missing money. She could not tell Bertha exactly what the suspicions were against Mortimer, although she had heard from her father all about it, and she knew that her father very strongly shared Mr. Palmer's idea as to who was to blame. She herself knew that it was true that Mark had borrowed from Mortimer, but she did not dare to bring down her father's wrath upon Mark by avowing this, and as she knew of nothing beyond that first loan which she had given Mark the money to repay, she hoped that it had been the last. It was but a poor satisfaction to her when Bertha turned it off so lightly, and took leave chatting gayly about her music.

"I could never have taken it so carelessly if it had been Mark," said Kate to herself; but Kate, direct and impulsive in all she did, could hardly understand Bertha's more reserved and wily nature. Bertha had only been gone a few minutes when Mr. Willoughby came in.

"Well," he exclaimed, rubbing his hands, "I think that Mark is going to fall on his feet this time. Your Uncle Palmer has about made up his mind to get rid of that young fellow Winstead, and your aunt writes to me that she thinks Mark will be put in his place."

"Surely Uncle Palmer will not turn off in disgrace a clerk against whom there is only suspicion!" exclaimed Kate.

"Oh, the young man is guilty beyond any doubt," replied Mr. Willoughby. "I have been pretty cross with Mark at times, when he did not act as square as I thought he ought to; but thank goodness! he is not one of these canting church-members, who pretend to be so much above ordinary mortals and then show up so much worse."

"Indeed, father, I don't think that is quite fair," urged poor Kate, who was sorely perplexed between her relief at hearing her father speak in friendly tones of Mark and her conviction that he was unjust to Mortimer.

"Never mind, child," replied Mr. Willoughby; "I flatter myself that I know something of the world after all these years. But don't worry your kind little heart. The truth is that Palmer & Davenant mean to let that young rascal down easy; and the idea is to put Mark in his place as a good excuse for dismissing the other without any complaint. Of course it is natural enough that Mr. Palmer would rather have his wife's nephew than a stranger. To my mind they are much too easy with Winstead, but that is their affair; and as for Mark, I could not have got him a better berth if I had spent a month looking for it. I am very glad that he is out of Harvey & Blake's."

Kate did not dare to say any more, and she listened silently to her father's gratified comments, wondering painfully whether it was really true that Christians were only putting on airs, as her father said, to hold themselves a little better than other people; and she could not help recalling that Bertha seemed not a bit different from girls who were not members of any church. Indeed, she had never heard a word from Bertha's lips to lead her to remember that her friend served another Master or had any higher or holier hopes and aspirations than her own.

"She has not set herself up to be a bit better than any of us," thought Kate; "but it does seem to me that if I were a Christian at all, I should care enough about the matter to let others see that I was one. I suppose that I am not good at hiding what my feelings are."

If Kate could have seen Bertha at that moment, she would have understood her better. She had left Mr. Willoughby's with a strange medley of pain and vexation agitating her mind. As soon as she reached home she went in search of her aunt, and poured out to her the whole story.

"It can't be true!" she exclaimed passionately. "No one ever could believe that Mortimer had anything to do with the loss of the money."

"I am very, very sorry, dear," replied her aunt; "but I fear that Mortimer's employers are not satisfied with what he can tell them, and that they do hold him responsible for the loss of the money."

"Why was I not told this sooner?" cried Bertha indignantly. "I am treated like a baby. Mortimer might have had more confidence in me."

"You were always so busy, dear," explained Miss Clive. "You did notice that he seemed grave and anxious. Did you try to find out the cause?"

"I never imagined that it was anything serious like this," replied Bertha; "and I thought of course he would tell me if it was anything important. I could have helped him. I will help him now. I will go at once to see Mr. Palmer."

"My dear child, it will do no good for you to interfere," said Miss Rachel decidedly. "You can give no fresh information in this unfortunate affair, and Mortimer does not wish to have appeals made to Mr. Palmer's generosity."

Bertha set her lips with the expression that her mother knew so well and that her aunt was beginning to find out meant a quiet determination to have her own way.

"Well, if seeing Mr. Palmer can do no good, at least I know that Mark Willoughby can do some good," Bertha remarked. "Mortimer has shown that he was worried by Mark's absence from town just now."

"My child, the best thing for you to do is to keep away from the Willoughbys just now," said her aunt. "You know your mother did not desire any intimacy between you and them, and you should heed her wishes.

"Mamma is not here to judge," replied Bertha sweetly enough, but with an undertone of obstinacy that roused her aunt's sorrowful indignation.

"Mortimer will be greatly helped by a little sisterly sympathy," she said; "but I am sure that you will do harm if you attempt to manage matters that you do not fully understand."

"I do understand this," persisted Bertha; "and if Mortimer had asked my advice, he would never have entangled himself with Mark Willoughby. He ought never to have lent him money. It was a very foolish thing to do."

"You are far too self-willed to be able to give good advice to others," interrupted her aunt almost sternly. "See how you treat my advice and your mother's wishes."

"Now, auntie, don't be cross with me," said Bertha coaxingly. "You know I am not exactly a baby, and really the very thing that you find fault with is most fortunate just at this time. I can manage Mark Willoughby. I only need to see him and you may be sure that he will do all in his power to help Mortimer."

"My dear child!" exclaimed her aunt, her fears aroused again by Bertha's tone, "what do you mean? Mr. Lindsay has this matter in his hands and he will do all that can be done. I should be very sorry to think that you had any such interest in Mark Willoughby or influence over him as your words imply."

"Nonsense, auntie dear!" cried Bertha gayly. "What do I care about Mark Willoughby? But there are things in which a woman's tact can do a good deal more than a man can accomplish. I happen to have heard Mark speak of Mr. Lindsay in no very flattering terms, so I think that without too great vanity I may say that Mark is more likely to heed my wishes than Mr. Lindsay's." She spoke with an imperious air that was very becoming to her style of beauty; but Miss Rachel saw too clearly the danger into which her willfulness might lead her, to be captivated by her manner.

"Bertha," she said firmly, "I must positively forbid you to have anything to do with Mark Willoughby until this affair is settled. I hope that regard for your own dignity and regard for your brother's welfare will induce you to heed my words."

Bertha's face flushed crimson at her aunt's unusually severe tone, and Miss Rachel added more gently, "Oh, my dear, do not act like a foolish, headstrong child. Mortimer needs your love and your prayers, and you can do more good in this unseen way than you think."

The flush of annoyance faded from Bertha's face at sound of the gentler tones, but she changed the subject of conversation; and Miss Rachel remained doubtful whether her words had produced any effect.

The next morning, which was Sunday, broke clear and bright, but with April-like clouds drifting about the sky. Miss Rachel, judging by her own feelings, had fully expected that Mortimer and Bertha would be inclined to go quietly to church with her, rather than to go as they had frequently gone, to some strange place where especially fine music was to be given. She was therefore surprised when she came down to the parlor dressed for church, to find only Mortimer waiting for her.

"Where is Bertha?" she asked. "I thought I heard her come downstairs."

"Yes," replied Mortimer; "but she has gone to hear the new soprano at St. Antholin's. I did not care to go there to-day. She took her umbrella to be prepared in case of a shower, and as it is such a short distance she said she would go alone."

Miss Rachel's face clouded, but she was too wise to let her disappointment in Bertha make her a dull companion for Mortimer. Only a silent prayer went up from her heart for her wayward niece, as she went out under Mortimer's escort into the quiet Sunday streets where cloud shadows were chasing the sunbeams, and many church-goers were wending their way to the different edifices from whose towers still vibrated the clang of the bells, or from whose portals the deep throb of the organ was already issuing.

Bertha had hurried off earlier than usual in order to avoid meeting her aunt, as she still felt hurt by the lack of confidence in herself that had been shown by her aunt and her brother.

"I could not settle my mind to listen to Mr. Colton's sermon," she told herself by way of excuse, "and I really need a little good music to quiet my nerves after all this unfortunate business."

So she settled herself in a vacant pew in the dimly lighted church, and dreamily watched the brilliant colors streaming from the east window until the last tones of the bell had vibrated into silence. Then a pulsation seemed to tremble through the richly colored rays of light, and slowly the solemn tones of the organ swelled forth and filled the church. Bertha leaned back in the cushioned seat with a feeling of utter contentment. All her worries and annoyances were forgotten. Mortimer, Aunt Rachel, the Brants, Helen, every one who had caused her trouble or anxiety, slipped into oblivion as she let her senses float upon the glorious sea of music that filled the arched aisles and seemed to carry her into a world where nothing but beauty and sweetness could enter.

When the anthem began she roused herself to more particular and critical attention; but she was not pleased; the voice of the new soprano was too thin, and her glow of happiness and contentment began to fade. At the same moment a lady behind her leaned forward and whispered in her ear :

"Can you tell me the name of the soprano singer? Is it Miss Gurley?"

"No," replied Bertha; "she left last month. This is a new one. I don't know her name."

"Oh, thank you," said the lady in the same low whisper, and sank back again.

Bertha felt a little curiosity to see the face of her questioner, but she sat so directly behind her that it was impossible to catch a glimpse of her without turning completely around. When the first hymn was sung her curiosity increased, for she heard a very rich, sweet woman's voice behind her. She forgot to sing herself, and listened to that voice alone throughout the whole of the hymn. At last the service was over, and quickly turning as if to leave the church, Bertha cast a searching glance over the people in the pew behind her. A young lady was just stooping for a fallen handkerchief, but as she raised her head she caught Bertha's eye and smiled.

She was so pretty, and her expression was so childlike and naïve, that Bertha involuntarily returned the smile; then fearing that she had been betrayed into country manners, and rather vexed with herself for her curiosity, she began hurriedly to make her way to the aisle. At the church door there was a little crowd. It had begun to rain during the service, and people who were not fortunate enough to have carriages and had not brought umbrellas, were waiting in the hope that the shower would cease. Bertha put up her umbrella and was just going to step out of the shelter of the church porch, when a voice behind her said:

"Would you mind telling me the nearest way to the Carlton House?"

Turning, she encountered her questioner in the church.

"It is four or five blocks," she replied. "Have you no umbrella?"

"No," replied the girl. "Can I take a car or omnibus?"

"They do not run that way," said Bertha, Then, seeing the girl's look of dismay, she added: "It is not far out of my way, and I will show you the way if you like. You would get wet through without an umbrella."

"You are very good. I was just wishing that you would let me share your umbrella," said the girl with the frankness and pleasure of a child. "Let us go quickly," and she drew her arm through Bertha's and hurried down the street through the rain just as a carriage was approaching the church door.

Bertha was puzzled by her companion. She was dressed handsomely and in perfect taste, and she was undoubtedly very pretty. She chatted a little too loudly and too freely to a perfect stranger, Bertha thought, but there was so much childish glee in her manner, that it was difficult to criticise her. They touched upon musical topics at once, and as they both preferred Miss Gurley, the former soprano, to the new one, they had one point upon which they could sympathize, and Bertha found herself chatting almost as freely as her unknown companion. As they turned into the street on which the hotel stood, the girl said suddenly :

"I am very glad that this shower came on, for I have been wanting very much to get acquainted with you, Miss Winstead."

"You have the advantage of me," said Bertha, answering stiffly in her intense surprise. "You seem to know my name."

"That is because you are a musician and somebody," replied the girl gayly, "while I am a nonentity, unless people happen to have had a regular introduction to me. There ! I see my father and mother have overtaken us, so I need not take you farther. I shall come to see you to thank you properly for your kindness," and she slipped her arm out of Bertha's and sprang into a carriage that had just drawn up to the curbstone behind them.

The umbrella bobbed forward at this sudden departure, and by the time Bertha had righted it the carriage door was closed, and she only caught an indistinct glimpse through rain-streaked glass of an old gentleman and lady inside. The next moment the carriage drove past her and she had another vision of her companion's bright face at the window and a dainty little hand waving to her.

"Who can she be ? And what on earth induced her to play me such an odd trick ?" thought Bertha. "I am sure that I would not walk home in the rain with anybody if I had a carriage to come for me."

Under other circumstances she would have been cross at being brought so far out of her way, but she could not be angry with such a bewitching little sprite, particularly when she was so beautifully dressed and had a carriage to ride in. She returned home full of her adventure.

Mortimer and Miss Rachel had already returned, and Mortimer was feeling the refreshment that those gain who go to church to worship and not to criticise the way in which other people worship or the way in which the minister conducts the services. It was a little jar to him when Bertha came in full of her adventure and, between the unknown Cinderella and the new soprano, absorbed the conversation at the dinner table.

Miss Rachel felt inclined to be vexed with Bertha as she noticed the clouded, harassed look come back to Mortimer's face, and in her own heart she thought bitterly that Bertha had undone all the good that Mortimer had gained from the morning service ; but in this she was, like doubting Peter, sinking from her own lack of faith. In truth, the mind that is jarred and harassed by trifling and frivolous talk, is just the mind that is tuned to other things. Mortimer suggested that the girl was no doubt related to some one of Bertha's pupils, and as soon as he had finished his dinner he betook himself to his own room. Bertha was not vexed by his disappearance, as she was fully occupied with speculation concerning the young girl and plans for meeting Mark Willoughby the next afternoon at the station.

"I can shorten Bessie Graham's lesson a little, and make it up to her the next time," she thought. "Then I can speak to Mark and nobody will be the wiser until all is set straight. Of course I will tell Mortimer afterward, and he will see that I was really the one to help him although he had so little confidence in me."

Why should she ask counsel and help from even a divine source, when she was so sure of her own ability and so well satisfied with her own plans? In fact, she had quite forgotten that she might need such help, and her prayers were only the usual petitions that she never omitted, but which this night were a little more hastily run over.

On Monday morning she was so absorbed in her plans that even her pupils noticed that she was inattentive to their lessons, and in the afternoon she was in a fever of excitement lest she should be too late to meet the train. The result was that she arrived at the station some time before the train was due, and being at a loss what to do with herself, she went to the book stand and idly turned over the leaves of the books and magazines. While she was thus engaged a merry voice accosted her:

"Miss Winstead, you appear again to help me out of a difficulty. This time I want to find the ticket office."

Looking up, Bertha met the bright eyes of her puzzling companion of the previous day.

"The ticket office is on the other side of the ladies' waiting room," she said rather coldly, pointing in the direction as she spoke.

"Dear me, away off there!" exclaimed the girl with a little pout. "And there, just my luck! I have left my umbrella in the carriage. Would you be so good as to buy me a ticket for Harleytown while I run to see if the carriage is there still?"

She held out the money for the ticket and Bertha mechanically took it and turned toward the ticket office. She had heard the Harleytown train called just before the girl addressed her, and she knew that there was no time to lose. When she returned, the girl was standing where she had parted from her, but she had no umbrella.

"You did not get your umbrella," said Bertha, as she handed her the ticket and the change.

"No, but it does not matter," said the girl. Bertha was going to ask her name, but at that moment the whistle of an incoming train attracted her attention, and, glancing at the clock, she saw that it was just the hour for the express on which Mark was to arrive. From the place where they stood she had a good view of the exit gate, and she eagerly scanned the passengers who began to pour out of it. Very soon she descried the tall figure of Mark Willoughby coming through the throng. He evidently saw her for he came directly toward her.

The eagerness with which he advanced and a secret pleasure at the success of her scheme, brought the blood mantling to Bertha's cheek. She held out her hand as he drew near and he took it with his usual deferential courtesy; but his eyes seemed to wander past her, and he said:

"Are you going to Briarley, Miss Winstead? Your friend has already gone through the gate."

"Oh, no," replied Bertha. "That young lady is no acquaintance of mine, only a forlorn damsel apparently little used to traveling, who asked me to buy her ticket for her to Harleytown."

"Indeed," remarked the young man, "and with your usual kindness you assisted her, I have no doubt.

"Oh, yes, I could easily do that," replied Bertha lightly, but she noticed that his tone was preoccupied and his glance still wandered to the gate for the Harleytown train whcih was now just closing. She could not own to him that she had come there expressly to meet him; but she was nervously anxious to get her errand accomplished, as she now saw all the chances of interruption which she had not taken into account when she laid her plan.

"I am glad that I happened to meet you," she began hurriedly, but at the same moment one of the station officials whom she knew by sight, passed by and lifted his hat.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" said Mark quickly. "I want to ask that man a question." He darted off instantly, and she was left for an embarrassing minute uncertain whether to wait for his return or to walk on toward the street. She chose the latter course, and he soon overtook her, but his manner was hurried and preoccupied.

"May I see you to the car, before I go after my bag?" he inquired. "I shall do myself the pleasure of calling this evening to hear all the news about the *musicale.*"

Bertha caught at this promise and answered more eagerly than she realized. "Oh, please do come, for I shall have a great deal to tell you and some other matters to ask your advice upon also."

"You flatter me," he replied. "I shall come with trepidation, for my advice is rarely asked and more rarely taken; but you may rest assured that I shall bring an overwhelming stock of the best I have on hand, since you have been so kind as to ask for it."

His tone was light and jesting, and Bertha was too excited and nervous to take it calmly.

"Please do not make fun of me," she said, her face flushing deeply. "It is a matter of the greatest importance. It is about Mortimer. He is in trouble and only you can help him."

Mark had his eyes turned to the clock which they were just passing, and he bit his lips impatiently, then when his glance returned to her face and he saw the flushed cheeks and appealing eyes, a very distinct though fleeting expression of annoyance flitted over his face and he looked around hurriedly as though he wanted to escape.

"Certainly, I will do anything that I can. Remember me to Mort," he said hurriedly. Then, seeing a car coming around the corner, he hailed it, and with most courteous attention put her on board.

As soon as she was gone he heaved a sigh of relief, and hurrying to the ticket office, bought a ticket for Harleytown. That done he stopped at the telegraph office to despatch a message, and went back to the baggage room to get his bag.

"I can't let Mort have any money now," he muttered as he boarded the slow accommodation train that left twenty minutes after the express on which Bertha's unknown questioner had departed.

Thus it happened that at the very time Mr. Atherton was making his way to Mr. Willoughby's to see Mark on his arrival, that young man was whizzing off to Harleytown.

CHAPTER XXIV

MERRIVALE FARMHOUSE ROBBED

MR. BRANT was so much concerned at the state of affairs revealed to him by Mr. Lindsay's questions and Jack's replies, that he went to the farmhouse as soon as Mr. Lindsay had departed, to consult with his wife. She was delighted to have the opportunity to explain to him her scheme for the extrication of Mortimer from his difficult position, but she was surprised to find that her husband raised some objections.

"Mr. Palmer is not the man to wish only to extort money," said he thoughtfully. "As I take it, he wishes to get from Mortimer a confession, and then amendment. He is quite right in this view if Mortimer really took the money; but I am far from satisfied that such is the case."

"I am quite sure that it is no more the case than that you took it," cried his wife emphatically. "I haven't had to do with boys all these years—and some pretty bad boys too out West—without learning to pick out an honest boy when I see him; and Mortimer Winstead is an honest boy."

"That is precisely my own opinion," replied her husband; "but the step which you propose would be taken as an admission of his guilt, I fear."

"Leave it to me to manage that," replied his wife bravely. "I am glad, now you mention this, that I did not let Mr. Lindsay have the money. No, I'll just take it myself to Mr. Palmer."

"I think it would be well to ascertain first whether it might not be more profitably employed for Mortimer's benefit," said Mr. Brant musingly. "Did you say anything about the visit of this man Hamilton in your conversation with Mr. Lindsay?"

"No, I forgot all about him," replied Mrs. Brant. "But what can that have to do with this?"

"I should judge that Hamilton entertains some ill will toward the Winstead family," replied her husband slowly. "I have no previous knowledge of the man to go upon; but from what you tell me of him I am by no means favorably impressed, and his own words to you would lead me to draw that inference."

"Of course. He has got a spite at them, and he would vent it any way he could," exclaimed Mrs. Brant briskly. "It was stupid of me not to think of that and tell Mr. Lindsay."

"I think that it would be well to give Mr. Lindsay some idea of the man, and of his words to you," replied Mr. Brant; "then the money could be used as seemed best; for I would gladly employ it in the service of your cousin and her family. It would probably be best that you and I should go in to Mr. Lindsay's office to-morrow."

"That will be the very thing. You are real smart to think out what ought to be done. I had clean forgot about Hamilton," said Mrs. Brant. "We will go to-morrow."

But the next day Helen was worse, and it was impossible for Mrs. Brant to leave the house. Then came Sunday, and the unusual exertion of preaching for Mr. Marshall, followed by the mishap of being caught in the shower on leaving the church, brought back Mr. Brant's cough sufficiently to make the doctor, who kept a friendly eye upon him, forbid him to leave the house for a day or two. It had been arranged that Mr. Brant should return to the farmhouse on Monday, though as yet Jack was not allowed to come home, but good Mrs. Marshall would not hear of Mr. Brant's exposing himself to the sharp east wind that was blowing on Monday morning, even for the short walk to the farmhouse. Thus a note came from the parsonage telling Mrs. Brant that her husband would not be home till the following day. Doctor Scott relieved Mrs. Brant's fears by assuring her that her husband would be all right if he was careful for a day or two.

Jane supplemented his assurance with her own quaint remarks :

"Don't you worry, ma'am," she said. "He's in real good hands. And whether it's a bit of a prayer or a dose of physic anybody needs, they never in their lives get them better nor more willingly given than at the parsonage from Mr. and Mrs. Marshall."

"Oh, do come and sleep in my room," urged Jessica, who had been sent to occupy Jack's room, as far removed as possible from the one in which Helen lay. "It is so lonely over there, and when the wind howls I can't help thinking that somebody is trying to get in at the hall window. It is going to be dreadfully windy to-night."

Mrs. Brant laughed at Jessica's fears, but she readily consented to sleep with her ; and when, as evening closed in, she heard how the east wind screamed around the little corner room and creaked the branches of the old trees outside, she did not wonder much at Jessica's nervousness.

She helped Jane by doing a little cooking for Helen, whom the doctor had reported somewhat easier, and then she decided in her own mind that the next day, if her husband was still confined to the house, she would go alone to Harriton to see Mr. Lindsay. The prospect did not look very favorable for Mr. Brant's going to town for, as the dusk deepened into darkness, rain began to dash against the window panes. It was more than the April shower of the preceding day, for with every hour the wind and rain increased in violence, and Mrs. Brant, partly yielding to Jessica's entreaties and partly urged by her own weariness, went up to bed early.

By ten o'clock the house was dark and quiet, except for the dim light in the sick-room. During the daytime Mrs. Winstead kept the doors of that room bolted to avoid any chance that Jessica might enter it, but at night she always slipped back the bolts that she might not be so completely cut off from all assistance in case of need. The room was a corner front room. One door led to the front staircase, and the other opened on a little cross passage that separated her room from that occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Brant, and led to the kitchen stairway. By this stairway Jane brought up all that was needed from the kitchen, and to prevent any draft from affecting Helen, Mrs. Winstead had put up a screen between the bed and this door. On the other side of the bed was a lounge, upon which she threw herself to take rest when Helen dozed.

The noise of the storm made Helen restless and her fever seemed to increase ; but at last after a great deal of weary tossing she dropped into a doze. Mrs. Winstead wound her watch and noted that it was nearly eleven o'clock ; then she lay down on the lounge to rest. The rattle of the windows, as the wind drove the rain against the panes, kept her in a nervous state, lest Helen should be startled from her sleep. At last, however, she herself slipped into the kind of half-waking sleep that sometimes comes to nurses, partially resting the brain while there is still consciousness of any movement of the patient.

A restless fling of the child's arms roused her fully, and she sat up and glanced at the bed. To her eyes that had been closed, the dim light of the night-lamp made the room quite distinct, and she noticed that the door, the top of which was visible above the screen, was partly open. Thinking that Mrs. Brant had come in to relieve her watch, as that kindly lady frequently offered to do, she rose and went around the foot of the bed to meet her. As she reached the screen, a strong wind blew the door wider open with a slight rattle, but there was no one to be seen. The noise roused Helen, and she called in weary, fretful tones. Her mother had only time to close the door to keep out the draft before she hastened to Helen's bedside.

As soon as the child had been soothed and had taken her medicine, Mrs. Winstead returned to the door to discover the cause of the strong draft, but when she opened it all was still. She slipped across the passage to Mrs. Brant's room, meaning to call her, but the door of that room was closed ; there was no answer to her gentle tap ; and when she tried to open it softly it resisted her pressure. Again the child's voice recalled her to her room and she hurried back, only stopping for a moment to glance at her watch, which lay on the bureau close beside the door. It was five minutes past twelve, and the wind and rain were still beating against the house. A little later in a lull of the storm, she heard distinctly the puff, puff of the train that stopped at Briarley at fifteen minutes past twelve on its way to Harriton.

Mrs. Winstead was puzzled by the occurrence, but she was soon too much occupied with Helen to give it any further thought. The child talked feverishly and half incoherently. The storm seemed to worry her, and it took all her mother's tact and skill to quiet her. The night wore away slowly and anxiously for the watcher, and it was a blessed relief to her when, toward the early hours of morning, the wind died away and the rain fell more softly. Helen fell asleep and soon afterward the sound of Jane's footsteps going down the kitchen stair told that the household was beginning to wake for a new day. Jane, who was very thoughtful of her mistress, always brought a cup of coffee to her door as soon as she got the water to boil; but this morning Mrs. Winstead heard her stumble over the last steps of the stair, and then almost directly she ascended the stairs again and appeared at the door with all the virtuous indignation of which an old and trusted servant is capable, written on her face.

"'Deed, ma'am, if this happens again you an' me will just have to dance upon a peat," she exclaimed, her wrath only made the stronger because in deference to Mrs. Winstead's uplifted finger of warning she had to speak in a whisper. "Here was I that careful that nothing from this room should come in the way of any other clothes, and I set this basket here, just particular for you to throw what was going to the wash into, and here I comes across these towels flung careless-like down the back stairs."

"I am sure that I laid those towels in the basket," said Mrs. Winstead, too much startled to take any offense at Jane's indignation. "Who could have moved them? It was a very dangerous thing to do for I used them when sponging Helen, and there was inside them the linen rags that I took off her throat and wrapped in paper for you to burn."

"That's here," said Jane as she examined the basket, "but the two towels were flung down the stairs, and near I came to breaking my neck over them in the dark too."

"Your shoes must have been very muddy," remarked

Mrs. Winstead as she inspected more carefully the towels that Jane held in her hand.

Jane for sole reply stuck forth a good-sized foot cased in a cloth slipper.

"How on earth then did they get so muddy?" asked Mrs. Winstead.

"That's what I would like to know, ma'am," replied Jane. "Somebody has wiped dirty boots on 'em."

"Surely it is not possible that Jack came home yesterday without my knowing of it," exclaimed Mrs. Winstead anxiously.

"Not one foot has he set in the house," replied Jane positively. "But these do look for all the world like a pair that he tied over his muddy boots one night when he and Master Mortimer had laid out to scare me, and wanted to steal down the back stairs quiet-like."

It was true that one of the towels was tied into a sort of loose bag, and a bit of string still hung around it. Mrs. Winstead now began to feel convinced that there was something wrong; but the sight of her watch lying undisturbed on her bureau made her slow to believe that a thief could have entered the house.

In obedience to her instructions, Jane took the cloths to burn and the towels to set to soak in a bucket, for she was not willing to run any risk of spreading the disease by letting them remain for further inspection. Then Jane went to call Mrs. Brant, and to inquire if she had been prowling about the house by night, but that good lady pooh-poohed the idea. Jane had returned to her kitchen and was busy over the breakfast when Mrs. Brant came in with a disturbed countenance.

"It is all true and I have been robbed," she exclaimed. "I had money in a drawer in my room and it is all gone."

"Bless us!" ejaculated Jane. "We might have been all murdered in our beds."

Mrs. Brant was too well used to the chances of life in a rough Western town to be as frightened as Jane and Jessica, but she was greatly distressed for, in addition to the loss, all her plans for helping Mortimer were now blighted.

"Are you quite sure that you did not put the money somewhere else and forget about it?" asked Jane.

Mrs. Brant only beckoned her to come upstairs to her room. The door to the kitchen stairway was still locked, but Mrs. Brant had entered by another door, which led to the front stairs. Now as she brought Jane in, the bureau drawer stood partly open and the window too was not fully closed, while a wet spot on the carpet showed where the rain had been beating in. Jane was going at once to Mrs. Winstead, but Mrs. Brant stopped her.

"Don't trouble her now," she said. "We will look if anything else is missing, and then I will go over and fetch Mr. Brant.

A close search failed to discover any further thieving, and they were relieved from anxiety in that respect; but Mrs. Brant began to feel more and more convinced that the robbery was no chance affair.

Jessica was in the front room and Jane was just placing the delayed breakfast on the table, when Jessica called from the dining-room window that Mr. Brant was coming up the path. He had come over fearing that his wife would take an early train to Harriton, and knowing that she was quite ignorant of the town.

"I am glad that I was in time," he said, as she opened the door; "it is fine and mild, and I think that I can very well undertake to transact our business with Mr. Palmer and Mr. Lindsay."

The tears shone in his wife's bright eyes as she related to him the calamity of the night.

"It has been somebody that knew I had the money. And I'll be bound that man Hamilton is at the bottom of it!" she exclaimed.

"We must be cautious how we draw conclusions," said her husband. "There is another clue that came to my knowledge last evening, and I am anxious to consult with Mr. Lindsay. But I want to know all that Mrs. Winstead can tell about this robbery. The man evidently entered the room by the grape trellis under our window, but why should he risk being discovered by going into any other room?"

This matter was settled at once by the voice of Jane, who had just come downstairs from carrying milk to Helen.

"Mrs. Winstead whispered me that she has missed twenty dollars that she had in her bureau drawer last night. There is not a cent left in the house, barring a little change that Mrs. Winstead had in her pocket," cried Jane excitedly. "It was just money the wretch was after, and he had the sense not to touch a thing that would be missed at once, and give a chance to know him if it was found on him. One greenback is just like another, barring only that it's dirtier."

Even in her grief and annoyance Mrs. Brant could not restrain a laugh as she looked at Jane's earnest and excited face, and this final statement nearly put her into a choking fit. Mr. Brant, however, kept his composure, and having made a closer inspection of the premises, he announced his intention of taking the next train to Harriton, and on his way to the station communicating to Mr. Marshall the state of affairs.

"He can tell whether it would be of any use to search the neighborhood. But my own impression is that the man would have taken the first opportunity to get to town. As you say that this all occurred before midnight by Mrs. Winstead's watch, the probabilities are that he took the twelve-fifteen train to Harriton. Keep cool and quiet, and on account of the sick child avoid all excitement.'' With this advice he took his departure.

CHAPTER XXV

MARK WILLOUGHBY MARRIED

MR. ATHERTON'S interest in the affairs of Mortimer Winstead had led him to take unusual pains to get at the solution of the mystery that seemed destined to blight the young man's prospects. Perhaps if the whole truth was admitted, there might have been a stronger interest than he felt in Mortimer that spurred him on; but if there was, he took no one into his confidence. From the office boy he could learn nothing that seemed to give any clue. The boy seemed very much frightened and only repeated that he did not know the name of the gentleman who gave him the letter to post; but he had met him afterward evidently coming away from the office, and there seemed no reason to doubt that it was Mr. Appleby. That gentleman could not be seen to deny or corroborate the deduction, as he had left Harriton as soon as his business with Palmer & Davenant was concluded, and no one knew where he was.

Mr. Palmer began to look with irritation upon the investigations, for poor Mortimer, in his anxiety and distress, was really working unconsciously against his own interests. He no longer had a ready, pleasant smile for his employers, and in one or two instances he had made slight blunders in his work that annoyed the precise business man. Mr. Willoughby had eagerly seized upon his sister's suggestion that Mark might have the vacant place, and he lost no opportunity to set Mark in a favorable light and to make known his distrust of Mortimer in Mr. Palmer's presence. In addition to all this, just when Mortimer was losing heart and favor, Mr. Palmer received a short note from Mark, giving him information that enabled him to take a very important order.

"See here!" he exclaimed to Mr. Davenant. "This is the fellow for us. He has put more money in our pockets in this one day than young Winstead has in all the years that we have employed him. Mark has a good head for business. His father doesn't understand how to manage a high-spirited young fellow like that. He gets down on him, and then there is trouble; but let me have the boy here and I'll engage that I'll turn him out a first-rate man of business, and he will be able to buy out his father before he gets anywhere near his father's present age."

Guy Atherton was sharp enough to see the way the wind was blowing, but he held firmly to his belief that if he could talk with Mark all would be set straight, and Mr. Lindsay as firmly held the opposite opinion. Thus it was Guy and not Mr. Lindsay who found out from Kate the hour that Mark was expected home, and it was Guy who went to meet him. As Mark did not appear, Guy went next to the station, and the first person he ran across was Clark, the gatekeeper. In response to Guy's inquiry whether the four o'clock express had come in on time, Clark assured him that it had come in on the minute.

"Were you looking for a friend?" asked the man. He did not know Guy personally, but he knew him by name.

"Yes," replied Guy. "I thought that young Mr. Willoughby would come in on that train; but I suppose he missed it."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Clark. "He did come in on it, for he spoke to me. I passed him when he was talking to Miss Winstead, and he ran after me to ask me when the next train left for Harleytown."

Guy bit his mustache vindictively, but he only said, "I am sorry that I did not get here earlier. I wanted to see him; but I suppose if he has gone to Harleytown he will hardly come back to-night."

"I can't say what he went for; I was not on duty when that train went out," replied Clark. "Mr. Dayton, at the ticket office, might tell you, for he knows Mr. Willoughby well, and would know if he bought a ticket."

"Thank you. It does not signify," said Guy. "My business must wait till to-morrow." But as he turned away and walked past the ticket office, he noticed that there was no crowd there; and as he knew Mr. Dayton, he stopped and inquired if Mark Willoughby had bought a ticket for Harleytown.

"Harleytown? Why, yes; there was a rush for Harleytown this afternoon, Mr. Atherton," said Mr. Dayton, who liked to joke when he was not too busy. "Miss Winstead came in a hurry to get a ticket for Harleytown before the four-five express left, and a little while later along comes Mark Willoughby to get a ticket for the four-twenty-five accommodation. A case of 'follow my leader,' hey?"

"What do you mean?" asked Guy sharply.

"Oh, nothing," replied the other man; "I was only joking. One hears gossip, you know."

"No, I am too busy with business for that," replied Guy, trying to pass off his sharpness with a smile. "Well, I guess I must let Mark hunt me up now, for I am not inclined to go to Harleytown to-night." Then with a pleasant good-evening he went out, biting his mustache more vindictively than before.

"It is just what I expected," said Mr. Lindsay, when

Guy returned and made his report, only omitting the mention of Bertha's name. "Now the next thing is to see Mrs. Brant; for if we don't look sharp, Mr. Palmer will just shake Mortimer off. We must get that money paid, and then we shall have time to look about us; for Mr. Palmer is a man of his word, and he can't very well go back on his promise, though I see that he would like to do it."

"We must get hold of Hamilton," said Guy.

"Very true; but that will take time; and first of all we must be sure that Mortimer will not be shipped off so soon as Mark gets back," said Mr. Lindsay. "Of course we may fail in that; but if I did not give Mrs. Brant her opportunity, she would never forgive me. She was so anxious to help Mortimer and his mother."

"We can't do anything to-night," said Guy wearily, "and I am tired out with running about. It is going to be a wretched night, and the sooner we get home the better."

"Come around in good time in the morning, and I'll run out to Briarley," said Mr. Lindsay, and thus they parted.

The next morning the trip to Briarley was rendered unnecessary by the appearance of Mr. Brant and Mr. Marshall, the latter having come to act as guide to his friend. On hearing of the robbery, Mr. Lindsay made many inquiries as to how it could have been perpetrated, and then he remarked:

"I hope that Mrs. Brant will not take this too deeply to heart, for really I doubt if the money would have done any good. Mr. Palmer is, I feel sure, prejudiced against Mortimer by this time, and strongly inclined to prefer Mark."

Mr. Marshall, who had learned of all the trouble for the first time this morning, was inclined to disagree with Mr. Lindsay.

"I have known Mr. Palmer for years," he said; "and although not, I regret to say, a Christian man, I have always observed in him a strict love of justice."

"My dear sir," retorted Mr. Lindsay, "it is exactly because Mr. Palmer considers it to be an act of justice that he will discharge Mortimer. It appears to me that the man called Hamilton and Mark Willoughby are playing this game to ruin Mortimer; and we can't get hold of either of them. I should not be the least surprised to learn that Hamilton knew something of that robbery last night."

"He certainly knew that my wife had money in the house, for she incautiously told him that," admitted Mr. Brant; "but I am inclined to the belief that another may be implicated in this matter. Last evening as I was sitting at the window, being as I have mentioned at the house of my friend Mr. Marshall and confined to the house with a cold, I saw a man pass along the road who reminded me so strongly of a man I knew in Silverbush that I am almost prepared to affirm that it was the same man Graves."

Mr. Atherton, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, now turned quickly:

"That is the very man I have had in my mind all along. Can you put me on his track?" he asked.

"No," replied Mr. Brant, "for I only had that passing glimpse; and he appeared to be coming from the station."

"Have you seen Hamilton?" asked Mr. Atherton.

"No," replied Mr. Brant. "I was not in the house when he called on my wife."

"Did Mrs. Brant know Graves?" asked Mr. Atherton.

"Yes; she has seen him in Silverbush," said Mr. Brant. "Not as frequently as I did, for he came rarely to my house; and she was not out among the miners as I constantly was."

"Still she would know him," remarked Mr. Atherton, with a disappointed drop in his voice, which had been eager and hopeful before.

"That is a clue worth following up, if you have reasons for supposing it. Is Graves the kind of man who would break into a house?" put in Mr. Lindsay.

"Oh, he is a thorough rascal, capable of anything," said Mr. Brant and Mr. Atherton almost simultaneously; but at the same moment the office door opened and a gentleman entered in such haste that he began to speak before he noticed that there were others besides Mr. Lindsay and Mr. Atherton in the room:

"I say, Lindsay, have you heard the news?" Then he stopped and glanced at the others.

Mr. Lindsay turning, recognized Mr. Davenant, and rising, held out his hand.

"I need not introduce you to Mr. Marshall," he said, as they shook hands; "but I do not know whether you have met the Rev. Mr. Brant, who is with his wife on a visit to Mrs. Winstead at Briarley. Mr. Brant, let me introduce Mr. Davenant."

"The name is sufficiently familiar to me, but I have never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Brant," said Mr. Davenant with a smile, as he cordially greeted the gentlemen.

A few commonplace remarks followed, and Mr. Davenant's eyes kept returning to study Mr. Brant's face with a curious expression, but he was interrupted with the query:

"What is the news that you were bringing?"

"Oh, it is about Mark Willoughby," said Mr. Davenant.

"Is he home?" inquired Guy eagerly.

"Home? No. He's married," said Mr. Davenant.

As all the gentlemen who were present knew more or less about Mark, each turned with interest to hear what was to follow.

"I did not know there was an engagement," remarked Mr. Lindsay. "It must have been settled pretty quickly."

"You are right there," said Mr. Davenant emphatically; "he was expected home last evening, but did not come. This morning there came a telegram from Harleytown that he is married."

"An elopement!" exclaimed Mr. Lindsay in amazement. "What can have possessed him? Who is the bride?"

"He does not say. His sister received a telegram this morning saying that he was married and bidding her break it to his father discreetly," said Mr. Davenant. "Discreetly indeed! Why, Mr. Willoughby is in a towering rage. I just met him on the street and happened to ask if Mark was home, and he fairly foamed, and blurted out the state of affairs to me. I believe he fancies it is some girl whose family he doesn't approve of; but at any rate I thought I would just stop in and tell you, for you maybe would have influence with him to calm him down a little. It is of no use to make a row and say things in public that one maybe would like to take back a little later. The boy isn't a bad boy; but really Willoughby doesn't manage him right."

"Hem, I've got an appointment—" began Mr. Lindsay. "But see here, Atherton," and he turned to find that Guy had vanished. "Does Mr. Palmer know of this?" he asked thoughtfully.

"I don't suppose he does," replied Mr. Davenant. "I was going to the office now, for I knew he wanted to see Mark this morning."

"A moment does not signify, does it?" said Mr. Lindsay. "You are the very person that these gentlemen and myself want to talk to." He then began as Mr. Davenant willingly settled himself in an arm-chair and recounted to him all their suspicions of Hamilton and his own conviction that Hamilton was trying to ruin Mortimer.

"He is a scamp ; and he swindled Mortimer's father, though Mr. Winstead was such a poor man of business that there was no way to get hold of Hamilton and bring him to justice. Still, knowing the inner working of the matter as I did, I knew that Hamilton was a complete rogue."

Mr. Lindsay spoke very impressively ; and Mr. Davenant, who had begun to lose remembrance of his resentment at Mortimer's wound to his self-esteem, now let his naturally easy and kindly nature predominate. He pulled his whiskers meditatively and replied slowly :

"I don't take much active part in the matter of selecting those in our employ. My partner has always attended to that, and I must say has shown great discernment of character. Still if you were to represent to him these facts as you have stated them to me, he would no doubt give them all due consideration, I should be very sorry to do young Winstead any injustice, and so would my partner ; but business is business and must be regarded before mere friendliness and — and so forth," ended Mr. Davenant rather lamely.

"Your suggestion is a good one and we will act upon it," said Mr. Lindsay ; "and we can count upon your good word with Mr. Palmer, I hope."

"Certainly, certainly," responded Mr. Davenant with alacrity. "I shall be heartily rejoiced if the young man can be completely cleared."

He rose as he spoke and turned to say good-bye to the other gentlemen, but his glance rested on Mr. Brant even while he was speaking to Mr. Marshall, and when he held out his hand to Mr. Brant, he said :

"I hope that I shall see you again. I shall call upon you at Briarley if you will permit."

"It would afford me great pleasure," replied Mr. Brant ; "but just at present there is serious illness in the family of Mrs. Winstead, and on account of your little girl you would probably do well to avoid coming to her house. Diphtheria is much to be dreaded."

"Ah, thank you for the warning," said Mr. Davenant ; "but I hope that all danger will soon be over and the illness will only delay my visit for a short time."

As soon as he was gone Mr. Lindsay was impatient to see Mr. Palmer, thinking that now when he was disappointed in Mark would be a most favorable moment to press all that might be said in favor of Mortimer. Mr. Atherton's continued absence chafed him, as he could not leave the office unless he was sure that Guy would attend to matters that required one or the other of them to be present.

"Why should not Mr. Brant and myself go to Mr. Palmer's office ?" inquired Mr. Marshall.

"That would effect all that is necessary," said Mr. Lindsay. "He is above all things a just man, and I am sure that he would listen to what you can tell him and defer any immediate action."

"I would rather hear that he was a Christian man," said Mr. Brant ; "human justice is prone to err, and we sadly need the guidance that the Christian is promised to ensure that we shall execute judgment aright."

Mr. Lindsay only bowed politely, as though he considered this the proper way for a clergyman to talk, but did not place much faith in it himself. Then he gave the two gentlemen all the suggestions that he thought might be useful to them, and they bade him good-bye and turned their steps to Mr. Palmer's office.

When Mr. Davenant, who had left before them and walked more rapidly, arrived at his office, he found his partner in a state of unusual exultation. Mortimer was not at his desk and only the bookkeeper was visible in the outer office.

"That boy will be worth his weight in gold to us," exclaimed Mr. Palmer as his partner entered the inner office. "See here, Davenant, what he has saved us to-day."

"Who? Winstead?" inquired Mr. Davenant.

"Winstead! Nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Palmer sharply. "I have discharged him. I am talking of Mark." He then went on to tell Mr. Davenant that he had received a telegram from Mark the evening before advising him to collect a large check that he had received from a firm with whom he had extensive dealings.

"I did not understand the matter, but one never loses by being over prompt," said Mr. Palmer. "I was on hand as soon as the bank opened and my check was cashed and safely transferred to our credit, and not half an hour later Neal & Co.'s checks were coming in fast and going to protest as quick as they were presented."

Mr. Davenant gave a low, annoyed whistle.

"Now I am sorry!" he exclaimed. "Harry Neal told me only yesterday that they were getting rather heavily run upon. He said somebody was spreading reports to try to injure their credit and he asked me if we would hold that check a day or two, as it was one of the heaviest out. I promised him that I would see you about it. It never occurred to me that you would be in such a hurry and I meant to tell you as soon as you came to the office."

Mr. Palmer leaned back in his chair with a little laugh.

"Don't worry yourself," he said. "That is always the cry when a firm gets into difficulties. We are lucky to be well out of the affair without loss."

Mr. Davenant still looked annoyed, but he changed the subject by inquiring, "What did you say about Mortimer Winstead?"

"I have discharged him," replied Mr. Palmer curtly. "I shall put Mark in his place this very day."

"You can't. Mark is not likely to be here to-day nor to-morrow either," said Mr. Davenant, curtly enough in his turn. "The fellow has run off and got married."

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Palmer, sitting bolt upright in his amazement. "Married did you say? When was that?"

"Last evening," replied Mr. Davenant. "He telegraphed to his sister; and Mr. Willoughby is pretty well heated up about it."

"I'll bet he is," cried Mr. Palmer. "Well, well, well! Mark is a sharp-fellow, and no mistake. I suppose of course the girl is Juliet Erskine. Her father has a pretty fortune rolled up for her, and she is the only child. He is a sharp fellow! And to think that when he was on the way to get married he stopped to telegraph to me about Neal & Co., and saved us that loss! His will be the best business head among us. I was badly cut up at first when I found that I had been fooled in Mortimer Winstead; but now I see that it is all working out well. Mark will be worth ten times what Mortimer would ever have been worth to us."

"All that may be true, yet it is a question of justice," urged his partner, who now felt all his sympathies with Mortimer and a decided dislike to Mark for his interference in the Neal business.

"Of course it is a question of justice," retorted Mr.

Palmer sharply. "No man can accuse me of having done an unjust action to any of my employees."

Mr. Davenant was irritated and matters did not look particularly agreeable between the two partners, when the bookkeeper entered to announce that Mr. Marshall and Mr. Brant were waiting in the outer office. The interruption was opportune to both the partners, but when Mr. Palmer heard the errand on which the clergymen had come, he very politely but very unmistakably gave them to understand that he did not agree with them.

"There are no proofs, sir, no proofs at all. All that you say about Hamilton's character I am quite willing to concede; but that does not clear the character of the young man who would have dealings with a rascal of that sort."

"I myself have had only a short acquaintance with Mortimer Winstead," said Mr. Brant, in his slow deliberate tones; "but I have seen evidences of earnest Christian spirit in him that lead me to doubt greatly whether he could so far have belied his profession as to enter into dealings with a rascal, and the lad himself denies all complicity with Hamilton. Mr. Marshall here, who is the young man's pastor and friend can speak from longer experience than I."

He turned to Mr. Marshall as he said these words and that gentleman warmly upheld Mr. Brant's opinion.

"I don't pretend to be a judge of Christian qualities," said Mr. Palmer coldly. "That has nothing to do with business. All I ask of my employees is unblemished business integrity, and I on my part accord to them the strictest and most impartial justice."

"The vicissitudes of my life have thrown me in contact with men of different occupations and very different characters," said Mr. Brant, "and I cannot say that I have found that Christian qualities have nothing to do with business. I do not think that you yourself, sir, would find the best employee of much use to you if he did not know or would not acknowledge for whom he worked."

"I do not follow you," said Mr. Palmer.

"Our Master Christ requires of us that we should both know him and live close to him. If we fail in this, how can we, while treating our Chief with injustice, hope to act with justice to our fellow-workers?" Mr. Brant's quiet voice and kindly courteous manner made it impossible to take offense where so clearly none was meant, but Mr. Palmer answered politely :

"I respect your principles, sir, and I should be glad if all clergymen were as well fitted for their office as yourself and my good friend Mr. Marshall ; but as I said before I am no judge of such matters, and I hope you will not consider me discourteous, if I suggest that you might make the same admission as to your ability to judge of matters concerning my business."

"It would do me no harm, and might be useful," remarked Mr. Brant, "if I knew more of the temporal matters connected with your business. And is it not of vastly more importance that you should know something of these spiritual matters which so nearly concern every man's future welfare?"

"Ah, there sir, you must talk to my wife," said Mr. Palmer with a smile. "She attends to the religion of our household and I never interfere with her in her own domain." Then rising as if to put an end to the discussion, he said, "I am sorry, very sorry, about young Winstead, and still more sorry to disappoint you and Mr. Brant; but strict justice compels me to act as I have done, and Winstead is no longer in my employ. I bade Mr. Johnson, our bookkeeper, settle with him this morning."

Mr. Davenant still looked annoyed and gloomy, but he said nothing; and there was nothing left for the two friends but to take their leave with heavy hearts.

"We would better stop again at Mr. Lindsay's," said Mr. Marshall. "He may suggest some means of getting Mortimer another position."

Mr. Brant however was very anxious to get home, as he saw that he could do no more good in town and the robbery had made him feel uneasy at the thought of leaving his wife and Mrs. Winstead alone. He therefore requested Mr. Marshall to leave him at the station, and to go on to Mr. Lindsay's alone; and Mr. Marshall agreed to this.

Mr. Lindsay was vexed with the ill success of their errand and surprised when he learned that Mark was still in favor with Mr. Palmer.

"I overheard some words between Mr. Palmer and Mr. Davenant as we were waiting for the bookkeeper to announce us," said Mr. Marshall, "and Mr. Palmer seems to think well of this marriage. He said that the lady, Miss Erskine, was the daughter of a very rich man."

"Oh, is that the way of it?" said Mr. Lindsay. "Now I understand Mr. Willoughby's anger; he can't bear Mr. Erskine."

"The young man has impressed Mr. Palmer most favorably with his business ability," continued Mr. Marshall. 'But Mr. Davenant did not look so well satisfied as his partner, and I think would willingly have said a word for Mortimer if it had been possible; but of course, when the lad is already dismissed there is nothing to be done."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Lindsay cheerfully. "We are not quite despondent yet. Guy Atherton is a clever fellow and he means to ferret this out. He may come in with news any moment."

"I hope that the Lord will make plain to us what we ought to do," said the clergyman; "I am mainly anxious that this should not have an evil effect on Mortimer's character. He was unusually steady and self-reliant for one so young, and I fear lest the injustice may embitter him and make him less careful."

"Why not go and have a talk with him?" said Mr. Lindsay. "It will do him good to see an old friend like yourself."

Mr. Marshall willingly acted upon this suggestion, and bade good-bye to the little lawyer, while Mr. Lindsay returned to his writing, with an occasional impatient glance at the door to see if Guy was in sight. It was late in the afternoon when Guy returned, and he looked worn and dispirited. In answer to Mr. Lindsay's questions he only replied shortly that he washed his hands of the whole affair.

"Come, come, don't be so easily discouraged," said Mr. Lindsay. "I own that I feel more inclined to believe that Mark will do the square thing now, for he has got such a rich wife that he can afford to lose Mr. Palmer's favor, and certainly he does not want Mortimer's place in that office."

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Guy impatiently. "It is no time for joking. You know very well that she has nothing of her own and very slim expectations if that young man in Colorado chooses to make a fight for a share of the property."

"Why, man alive, Mark has married Juliet Erskine, the daughter of the millionaire!" exclaimed Mr. Lindsay. "Mr. Marshall heard Mr. Palmer say it."

"Then Mr. Palmer is off on the wrong scent," said Guy moodily. "I heard at the station last night that Mark Willoughby had gone to Harleytown after Miss Winstead, who had bought a ticket for that place just before he did, and he was seen talking with her in the station before the train left."

"Humbug!" cried Mr. Lindsay. "Bertha Winstead is a headstrong little puss, but she is not the girl to do a thing of that sort. That is not the way Mrs. Winstead brings up her children. You go around to Miss Halsey's this evening and have a talk with Mortimer over this muddle, and I'll wager anything that you will hear some of Miss Bertha's best music."

"I have just come from there," said Guy almost fiercely, "and Miss Rebecca Halsey told me that she had not come home, and they were worried about her; and Miss Clive had gone to some of the houses of her pupils to inquire."

Mr. Lindsay drew in his breath with a long whistle.

"When did she leave home?" he asked.

"Oh, I didn't stop to ask all particulars," replied Guy. "Besides, poor Miss Rebecca was in a grand fluster, and had been crying over Mortimer's dismissal and over a letter from Merrivale telling them the child was worse and something about the robbery. It was no good to cross-question the poor soul. There!" he added with a sudden shake of his shoulders, "I can't do any more in this business; so don't let us talk of it any more. Just give me those papers on the Jerrold case, won't you? I think that if I run out to Chicago by the night train I can hunt up that missing witness for you."

"That can wait," said Mr. Lindsay. "The case won't come up for some time yet."

"Well, well, it is better attended to at once," repeated Guy, and Mr. Lindsay, comprehending the cause of his restlessness, made no further objection.

CHAPTER XXVI

A STORY FROM THE PAST

KATE WILLOUGHBY sat alone in her room. She had done nothing since her father went out in such stormy wrath that morning but to wander disconsolately from room to room, unable to settle to anything, afraid to go out lest she should meet curious friends, longing for some one to whom she could pour out all her disappointment and misery, but so impatient at Mrs. Hughes' attempts at consolation that the poor old lady had been driven to keep out of her way.

At noon the postman brought a letter from Mark. It was very hastily written, and the writer showed no appreciation of his sister's feeling concerning the step he had taken. He assured her that she and Juliet would get on together famously when they really knew each other, and then he begged her to try to "rub the old gentleman the right way, and get him into a good temper," as he was very anxious to bring Juliet back to Harriton and set straight any talk that might have arisen from the sudden and singular manner in which the marriage had taken place. Kate had thrown the letter down and was sitting too absorbed in her own angry and painful reflections to notice faint sounds, when the door opened and Mrs. Davenant appeared.

"Did I startle you?" asked that lady in her gentle tones. "Excuse me, dear; Mrs. Hughes told me to come to your room, and I have a question to ask."

Kate rose with a swift blush at her own lack of cordiality.

"Come in. I think that you are almost the only person that I should feel willing to see," she said wearily; "unless, perhaps, it might be Bertha Winstead."

"That is the very young lady whom I have been to look for, and I could not find her," replied Mrs. Davenant brightly. "I can't think where she has vanished to so suddenly. She did not come to give Myrtle her lesson this morning, and she was not at her boarding place, for I have just driven there to inquire. I thought that I might find her here."

"No, I have not seen her," said Kate, rousing herself with an effort to take an interest in what Mrs. Davenant was saying.

"Or, perhaps, she has gone out to her home," said Mrs. Davenant. "But as you know the Winsteads pretty well, it may be that you can tell me what I want to know."

"No, I do not think that she has gone home," said Kate, recalling vividly the conversation that they had had together when the *musicales* were first planned, and Bertha's words about her mother's visitors. She was therefore a little surprised when Mrs. Davenant inquired:

"Can you tell me anything about Mrs. Winstead's visitors? I mean the missionary and his wife who are staying there?"

"No; I have not met them," said Kate indifferently. "From what Bertha said about them I imagine they are rather vulgar Westerners."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Davenant, with an odd expression in her beautiful eyes, which Kate was too much absorbed in her own troubles to catch. "I fancy that the gentleman did a great service to Mortimer Winstead, for my husband, who had taken a dislike to the young man, came home today quite changed in his opinion and very much interested in him, all from something that this Mr. Brant had told him. That is the name, I believe?" she added questioningly.

"Yes, that is what Bertha called them, and I suppose from what she said that they are good and worthy people," said Kate. "Indeed, if they were not that, Mrs. Winstead would never, I feel sure, have invited them to her house. But they must be quite common and illiterate. In fact," she burst out bitterly, "Bertha and I were sympathizing, for I was telling her how utterly antipathetic the Erskines were to me, and she spoke of these people and her aversion to meeting them."

For one moment Mrs. Davenant's eyes danced with a look that seemed to be almost irrepressible glee ; then a slight mist came into them, and she answered gravely :

"My dear, let a woman who has seen something of the troubles that may be caused by thoughtless words, give you a word of advice. I know that you are feeling very badly, for I have heard from my husband of your father's vexation with your brother ; but that will all pass over—and in truth the people are of more importance in a marriage than the way in which it is arranged. I know that all the talk that this hasty step causes must be dreadfully annoying to you ; but the girl herself is a kind and warm-hearted creature, as far as I have heard ; and if you take care to say nothing that will rankle and bring about estrangement you can do a great deal to make her what you would like her to be."

Kate was beginning a hasty reply when there was a tap at the door, and a servant announced that Miss Clive was in the drawing room.

"Perhaps she has come to tell you something about her niece," exclaimed Mrs. Davenant eagerly.

Kate hesitated a moment, for she was unwilling to have their conversation interrupted, and she was not in the mood to see any one ; but her friend was so evidently in earnest in her desire to learn where Bertha was to be found, that she suggested as pleasantly as she could that they should both go down to see Miss Clive.

Miss Clive, instead of coming to bring any news of Bertha, had come to ask news, and she was evidently disappointed and disturbed when Kate assured her that she had not seen Bertha at all that day. But she strove to conceal her anxiety, and rose, saying with an attempt at playfulness:

"You know she is an old maid's bairn now, and I am very fussy about her if she happens to be out longer than I expected."

The impulsive Kate felt all her sympathies aroused for this gentle, elderly lady and she answered warmly :

"I shall give Bertha a scolding for ever letting you become anxious about her. Sit quietly with us a little while and I will give you a cup of tea. I should not be at all surprised if Bertha came in for her share, as she often stops to see me when she is on her way home in the evening, and to-day she very likely knows that I have had unpleasant news and will have a word of sympathy for me." Kate's kindly speech ended with a bitter ring, for she was too thoroughly disturbed to conceal her feelings long, and could not forget her own grievance in her thought for others.

Mrs. Davenant's eyes followed her with a compassionate, and at the same time a sorrowful glance, as she crossed the long room to ring the bell and order tea. Miss Clive, who had just heard from Mortimer of Mark's marriage and Mr. Willoughby's anger, was at no loss to interpret the meaning of all this and longed to speak a word of sympathy to the girl ; but she knew her too slightly to venture on it if Mrs. Davenant had not leaned over and whispered :

"Help me to persuade her to put aside all bitterness and think only of her brother's welfare."

The hurried whisper changed Miss Clive's intention. She had not meant to stay, but now she saw that she might do some good, and she knew that she could not hunt farther for Bertha before nightfall, as she had already inquired at the only other places where the girl was likely to have stopped.

"Perhaps the Lord has work for me to do right here," she thought, and she quietly loosened her wrap and had a kindly word ready for Kate as she returned to them. Kate made an evident effort to keep up a conversation on ordinary topics ; but she was constantly losing the thread and betraying that she paid no attention when her companions spoke together and left her free to fall back upon her own thoughts. At last some mention of an approaching marriage called forth a bitter reply from her, and Mrs. Davenant said :

"Miss Clive is too good a friend of mine for me to stand on ceremony with her, and I want you to let me ask her for her opinion of the situation in which you find yourself, Kate."

Kate flushed and looked irresolute. Then she asked quickly, "Have you a brother, Miss Clive?"

"No, my dear," replied Miss Clive, with a sad little shake of her head. "But I was willful and headstrong."

"I don't think that you can understand what it is to have one's only brother mar all his prospects in life by a sudden foolish act," said Kate hoarsely.

Mrs. Davenant had turned to a table near and was gathering up her gloves and card-case and handkerchief. Miss Clive leaned forward and laid her hand on Kate's, only saying with the most winning kindness :

"Tell me, dear; I wish I did know how to help you."

"Oh, it is impossible!" exclaimed Kate. "When a young man marries in haste, captivated by a mere pretty face, it is a blunder that can't be mended."

"Do you mean that your brother does not really care for the girl whom he has married?" asked Miss Clive, shocked and startled as her old fears concerning the young man's feeling toward Bertha crowded back to her mind.

"How can he?" exclaimed Kate impatiently. "She is beneath him in every way, except perhaps that she will have plenty of money."

"But if she loves him she will try hard to fit herself for her position as his wife," said Miss Clive. "And think how you could help her if you receive her kindly."

"That is just what Mrs. Davenant was saying at the time you came in," said Kate turning to her friend.

"And I say the same thing still," replied Mrs. Davenant lightly, as she finished buttoning her glove. "I have heard of Juliet Erskine, and I feel sure that she is the kind of girl who will improve."

"You did not spend some weeks in the same hotel with her, as I did at Sea Beach last summer," replied Kate moodily.

"No, but I have seen giddy young girls in that way at a summer hotel, where idleness, thoughtlessness, and foolish companionship, have led them into doing and saying things that impressed me very unfavorably, and I have afterward found that the same girls under better circumstances showed themselves to be really fine women."

"Juliet is nothing but a flirt. She cannot really care for

Mark. Just let me tell you this incident that was told to me last summer,'' said Kate resentfully.

''Stop a moment, dear; do not tell it until I tell you what happened to me once,'' interposed the gentle tones of Miss Clive.

Kate paused in surprise, and Mrs. Davenant, who knew that Miss Clive would gain Kate's attention better if she did not take part in the conversation, turned away to a mirror and began to arrange her veil. Miss Clive hesitated, and a soft flush stole over her thin cheeks, but she had begun and she went bravely on.

''It is a story that always gives me a painful feeling of remorse, although it happened many years ago,'' she said. ''But I will tell it to you and let you draw your own conclusion. I was a young girl and I was visiting friends at a college town where I met several of the students. One of these young men was particularly bright and intelligent in his studies, though he was very quiet and paid no attention to the parties and amusements that the gayer spirits planned. He was so quiet and said so little about himself, that out of sheer mischief we used to conjecture all sorts of stories about him. One day, however, I met a girl who told me that she knew his family and that he had a real history that was rather romantic. She told me that his father was dead and his mother had married again. We knew that much already from himself. But she added the information that his stepfather was very grasping and unkind, that he did not like his stepson, and was very much annoyed by the thought that this young man would one day inherit the property of his mother. I believe that there was another child and he wanted it for his child. My informant told me that this lad was brought up most rigidly and was kept in ignorance of the fact that he had any inheritance; only what would take him through college was allowed him, and that was so scanty an allowance that he could not afford to spend a cent beyond what was necessary.

"I was very indignant and I accepted the tale without any attempt to discover whether it was true, and—here comes the worst part of it—I repeated it. It was at the commencement exercises and I had been introduced to an old gentleman who had come on to attend commencement. He was talking about the different students, asking their names and their standing. He did not ask about this one, but I volunteered information, and as the old gentleman seemed interested in hearing me praise his attainments, I next launched into this precious bit of family history, possibly coloring it a little more highly. At any rate I added my own comments on the stingy stepfather. The old gentleman made no remark until I had finished. Then he said very coldly: 'It is a pity that the young man's mother should be in the power of such a dishonest man; but I question his taste in allowing these details to be public talk.' Then he moved away and I never again had an opportunity to speak to him."

"Well," said Kate, "what harm did that do, Miss Clive, that it should worry you so long afterward?"

"My dear, I learned afterward that I had been talking to the young man's stepfather and that my thoughtless words had made a complete estrangement. The young man and his mother were left extremely poor when his own father died and the stepfather had furnished all that was needed for the young man's education in a very liberal style. I was told that the young man could not bring himself to take more than was absolutely necessary, for in fact there was no real sympathy between the stepfather and son; but that only made matters worse, because there was no opportunity for an explanation as there might have been if they had been really very friendly."

"What became of them?" asked Kate deeply interested.

"I do not know anything about the rest of the family," replied Miss Clive; "but I know that the young man went away to a most uncongenial region to make his own living as best he could, and although his work has been a noble one, he has always been very poor and at last his health broke down."

"Do you mean that he died?" asked Kate in pitying tones, roused from her own troubles by the sight of Miss Clive's quivering lips. She had hardly uttered the words when a low but quickly smothered exclamation from Mrs. Davenant caused her to look up at her friend. Although Mrs. Davenant's back was turned to them, Kate caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror and was startled to see its expression of painful interest. Miss Clive however saw nothing and was replying earnestly:

"Oh, no! I trust and believe that he has yet many years of useful and happy life before him; but that cannot atone for the harm that I wrought by my thoughtless words. You may well imagine, dear child, that I did not speak of this with any other object than to give you a warning. Oh, I wish that I could urge upon every young girl to be careful never to repeat the evil that she may hear of people unless it is absolutely necessary. Tell what is good and kind, and if there is nothing of that sort to say, then say nothing."

Kate was too much touched and abashed by the fervor of Miss Clive's words to reply. Her conscience reminded her of several instances of Juliet Erskine's kind-heartedness, and she knew that the girl was a devoted daughter and was apt to espouse most warmly the cause of any one whom she considered unjustly treated; but she could not yet bring herself to look at this side of the character of her obnoxious sister-in-law. Miss Clive seemed to understand her, for she did not show any surprise or disappointment at her silence, but leaning over kissed her and whispered :

"May the dear Lord show how you ought to act and give you the strength and the meekness to follow his will in this matter."

Mrs. Davenant had now turned and she saw that Miss Clive was very pale and evidently shaken by the memories that her own words had stirred. She also knew that Kate would better be alone to think over what had been said.

"It is late," she said cheerily to Miss Clive, "and you must let me take you home. My carriage is waiting and I shall be glad of company."

Miss Clive thankfully accepted this offer, for she felt weak and tired after her unusual exertions of the afternoon. They said good-bye to Kate, who had lost so much of her defiant self-absorption that she felt really sorry to see Miss Clive go, and they were whirled quickly through the dusky streets to Miss Halsey's door.

Whatever passed between them during that drive certainly did Miss Clive good, for when she alighted at her door her eyes were shining with happy tears and her face was bright and thankful. Mrs. Davenant leaned forward with a bright smile to press her hand again as Miss Clive turned at the carriage door to thank her.

"No, no," she said ; "it is I who cannot sufficiently thank you. But we are now close friends between whom words are not needed."

It was well for Miss Clive that she had something to cheer her, for no sooner had she entered the house than all her anxieties returned on hearing that Bertha had not yet been seen.

"Mortimer has gone out to Briarley," said Miss Rebecca tearfully; "but I can't think why the dear child should have gone there without a word to us."

"Nonsense, sister," said Miss Ann. "Surely it is the most natural thing in the world that she should go to see her mother."

"Oh, she ought not to have done that!" exclaimed Miss Clive in alarm. "Think of the danger. She could not be so headstrong and willful; I warned her most urgently."

"Where else can she be?" sighed Miss Rebecca; and truly it was but a choice of anxieties.

It was nearly ten o'clock before the sound of Mortimer's foot on the steps brought relief to the watchers. His face looked clouded, but he answered to their eager questions:

"Yes; she is at Merrivale. She went out there this morning and went straight upstairs to Helen's room. Mother was taking a nap while Helen dozed and she waked to see Bertha sitting beside the bed. Bertha says she means to stay and help mother with the nursing. It can't be helped now. Helen was pleased to see her, and you know when Bertha makes up her mind to do anything she is not easily moved. So mother had to give in, but I am afraid it is going to be a bad business. Poor mother had her hands full with one patient and she can hardly manage if she is to have another under her care."

"Poor, foolish child," sighed Miss Clive. "But there, we must just hope for the best."

A little while before, Mortimer would have had some sharp words of comment upon Bertha's obstinacy, but his own troubles had shown him how easy it is to let go the hand of the only Helper and to try to guide one's self by the light of one's own will till a severe fall comes as consequence of the mistake, and now he held his peace.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MISSED TRAIN

ON that eventful Monday evening when Bertha was waiting, at first with eager, joyful hope and then with growing and bitter disappointment, for the coming of Mark Willoughby, that young man was standing at the station at Harleytown watching keenly each passenger who came in out of the rainy streets and passed through to the train for Harriton. At last the clock pointed to half-past seven. The puff, puff of the engine, and then the heavy rumble of wheels announced the departure of the train. It was the last one that would leave for Harriton until the eleven o'clock express, but Mark made no effort to board it. He looked worried and undecided, but his attention was turned to the dingy street of the little town, down which a few dripping umbrellas came bobbing and gleaming under the scanty rays of the street lamp in front of the station.

The umbrellas concealed the features, but left revealed the overcoats and trousers of their masculine owners, and Mark hardly gave them a second glance. The only petticoat in sight on the sloppy pavement appeared beneath a particularly dingy and battered umbrella, but something in the way that the skirt was held out of the mud caused Mark to rivet a piercing gaze on the unconscious owner even before she had come near enough for him to note that the daintily gloved hand grasping the skirt and the neatly shod little feet that tripped deftly around the puddles, were strangely out of keeping with the old umbrella.

He drew back into the shadow as this rather incongruous figure stopped before the station and ran lightly up the steps. As the shabby umbrella was lowered, a very pretty girlish face was disclosed, with rosy cheeks and lips glowing from the hurried walk through wind and rain, and dark eyes shining as though some joyful secret lurked beneath the long lashes. But the sight of the empty track brought a startled expression into the eyes, and a hasty glance at the clock completed the dismay of the dainty little lady.

She stood a moment irresolute, then she turned back to the door and glanced across the street at a small hotel. While she stood apparently debating what she should do next, Mark advanced out of the shadow to her side, and in a low voice that shook a little with feeling, he said :

"Juliet, are you here alone?"

"Mark !" she exclaimed with a start and a glance of unfeigned relief and pleasure. "Where did you drop from so opportunely? Yes, I am alone, and I have missed the train to Harriton and shall have to stay here till some awful hour of the night before the next train comes along. Do you know whether that is a respectable place over there? I am hungry and rather wet too."

"Why not go back to your friends?" asked Mark. "You can't go to Harriton at midnight."

"I have no friends here," replied the girl, "and I don't know any one who could take me in for the night."

"Then what on earth has brought you here?" asked Mark almost fiercely as he glanced at her satchel.

She laughed merrily and raised her eyes with a saucy gleam of mischief in them to his gloomy face.

"Come into the waiting room," she said. "I have something here that I think you will be glad to see."

Mark followed her silently, and as she sat down and opened her bag, stood watching her with an expression that would have been quite new to most of his friends who knew him as gay and careless to a fault.

"There," she said, as she drew out a thick brown-paper parcel. "Sit down and I will let you have one peep."

She raised a fold of the cover as she spoke, and Mark bent his head and caught a glimpse of letters and other papers. A sudden look of eager relief flashed over his gloomy face as he exclaimed :

"Where did you get those ? Tell me, Juliet. Don't tease me now, dear, I can't bear it."

His voice was so pleading and his hand closed over hers with such a loving pressure, that all the mischief died out of her face and a mist gathered over the bright eyes as they glanced up at him with a shy expression of wistful affection that Kate Willoughby would have said was utterly foreign to the nature of Juliet Erskine.

"Did you ever hear of Betsy Graves ?" she asked.

He shook his head silently.

"Well, I knew her, and I helped her by sending her some clothes for her baby when she was left all alone and in great straits to keep herself and the child. Her husband was a scamp, and he got in some trouble and went off and left her. That was a few years ago. The poor baby died, as all her other children had died, and, poor soul, she was quite broken down. I don't think that she has ever been the same since ; but she was very faithful to me. I sent her flowers for the child's coffin, and she spoke of that when I saw her to-day, and she got me these papers at once when I told her that I wanted them very badly for a friend of mine."

"Do you mean to say that you know that man's wife, and have come all the way out here to go to his house and get these papers and so save me from disgrace?" exclaimed Mark in a low, hoarse voice.

"Oh, I managed that very easily," replied the girl lightly. "I told mother that I was going to Morfield to see an old school friend, Myra Clapp. Father had gone out and mother had a sick-headache, so they could not come to the station with me."

"They must be frantic about you," said Mark.

"Oh, no," she replied; "I was to stay over night. Mother told me to stay, and I brought the satchel to please her; for of course it is lonely and dull for me at the hotel when she is laid up, and she said that I could do her no good. She only wants to be let alone when she gets these headaches."

While the girl was chattering on, Mark was thinking deeply. He now interrupted her again, laying his hand on hers and speaking very low and earnestly.

"Juliet," he said, "you have done a great thing for me to-day, and I am going to ask you to do one thing more."

The girl looked up eagerly, though her face paled a little at the earnestness of his tone.

"I cannot leave you here all alone in a town where you know no one; and, Juliet, I must have the right to protect and care for you."

"Oh, I might get Betsy to take care of me for to-night," hastily said the girl, shrinking back a little as she caught his meaning.

"No, no, that is impossible. The secret service men are on the track, and I thought that a man who came in the last train while I was watching here for you, looked like one of those detectives. You see that it would be impossible for you to go there when the house may be searched by detectives at any time. It is horrible to think how near you may have been to getting mixed up in such an affair,'' and Mark shuddered a little as he spoke. Then he quickly resumed his pleading, and Juliet soon felt the force of his argument.

''I wanted to have such a nice wedding, and I did want to have your father and sister present,'' she said with a tearful pout.

''Fine weddings are so commonplace,'' urged Mark, beginning to feel that he had carried his point. ''And you shall have the nicest parties afterward a bride can want.''

''Bride!'' exclaimed the girl. ''In this shabby old gown!'' and she laughed a little nervously; but Mark knew that he had won his suit and after a few more words of encouragement he went to find out the address of a minister whom he knew to be a friend of Mr. Marshall of Briarley.

The kindly minister and his wife were interested in the young couple. Mark explained just enough of the untoward circumstances of the young lady having missed her train, to show the worthy couple the cause of his desire for this speedy marriage.

When thus suddenly and unexpectedly Juliet found herself a married woman, her first thought was to write to her mother. Mark had dispatched the hasty telegram to his sister. To him it was a relief to feel that the matter was now settled beyond any chance of discussion; for he had known, ever since his engagement to Juliet, that it would be very distasteful to his father and sister. With his usual facility for putting off what was likely to prove unpleasant, he had delayed informing them of his engagement. Indeed, it was only just before his departure from Harriton on this recent trip that he had in due form ''spoken'' to Juliet's parents, although from his frequent visits they had suspected what was coming.

The fact that his family had taken no notice of the arrival of the Erskines in Harriton had nettled old Mr. Erskine ; but Juliet had skillfully used part of the information that she had gained from Mark to explain it. She had told her parents that Mark's father was quick-tempered and apt to find fault with his son, and just at this time he was down upon poor Mark because some business affairs had not gone to please him. At this, kind-hearted Mrs. Erskine's interest was excited, and she remarked :

"I hope, Juliet, that the young man don't take after his father in that. I will say this, whatever faults your father may have had—and there's no man who hasn't got his own share—he never, since the old days when he first came a courtin' me, got cross in his home because he didn't get all the money he wanted out of his business. And I can just tell you and any other girl, that's the sort of man that makes a husband who's goin' to wear well."

Mr. Erskine's puckered brow relaxed under the soothing effect of these words. He muttered some of the usual strictures that men who have no sons are apt to have in stock concerning men who have sons, "Don't know how to manage 'em," and such remarks ; and Juliet, being one of those clever young ladies who do know very well how to manage their parents, soon coaxed both him and her mother into a friendly mood toward Mark.

Then she had set her fertile brain to work to plan how she should win over Mark's sister, of whom in her secret heart she stood a little in awe. She discovered that Kate Willoughby was particularly intimate with Bertha Winstead, and immediately the idea struck her to make the acquaintance of Miss Winstead and through her gain Kate's favor. The alarming discovery of the difficulties into which Mark had run himself required her immediate attention, and beyond the slight chance which her encounter with Bertha in the church had afforded her, she had had no time as yet to carry out the plans for the winning of Kate's good-will. She had however been impressed by Bertha's quiet, reserved, ladylike demeanor, and her thoughts reverted to this possible ally as she finished her hastily written letter to her mother in the rather dingy room which was the best that Mark could secure at the hotel.

"You will write to your home," she said to Mark, and he agreed without mentioning to her the telegram that he had already sent. In truth, he hoped that the next day would bring him a letter from Kate that would make him feel it possible to take Juliet to his father's house at once and bluff off the talk that the hasty marriage was sure to cause. Kate had always been so ready to manage disagreeable affairs for him, and to smooth out the muddles in which his carelessness or selfishness involved him, that it did not occur to him that she might not be inclined to help him in this instance.

But the morning mail on the following day brought no letter from Kate, and his hopes that he might be able to telegraph to Mr. Erskine that he and his bride would be at Mr. Willoughby's house in Harriton that afternoon, slowly vanished.

The afternoon however, brought Mr. Erskine himself in no very amiable mood; but Juliet was equal to the emergency. She took upon herself the whole task of explaining her escapade and all Mark had to do was to explain that he had met her at the station alone and without friends, after she had just missed the last available train by which she could return to Harriton that night.

Juliet simply told her father that she had come to Harleytown to see a poor woman whom she had befriended a few years before and whom she had learned was in Harleytown and in poor circumstances ; and she had not counted on being delayed so long, but intended to return in time to go out to spend the night with her friend, according to the plan she had mentioned to her mother.

Mr. Erskine went to see the Rev. Mr. Warner and assured himself that all had been done properly, and then Mark, in a private conversation in which the matter of settlements was broached by Mr. Erskine, begged him to draw up any settlements that he deemed proper and promised that they should be signed and made as secure as though the whole had been done before their marriage.

"Whatever is Juliet's should be settled upon herself," he said. Mr. Erskine's brow cleared and he held out his hand to the young man saying : "Come right back with me to town and we will have it all attended to at once ; and Juliet must come to her mother, who was not able to be out of bed, or she would have been here with me."

Thus it happened that while Miss Clive and Mrs. Davenant were talking with Kate, Mark and his bride had already arrived at the Carlton House.

"It is too late to attend to that business this afternoon," said Mr. Erskine. "We will see about it the first thing in the morning."

Intent upon pleasing their daughter, a dainty little dinner was ordered in their apartments, and Mrs. Erskine insisted upon sitting at the head of the table.

Setting aside a slight irritation that his father and sister should be so slow in doing what he considered the right thing by his bride, Mark was wonderfully comfortable that evening.

The papers that might have caused most unpleasant scandal, had they fallen into other hands, lay securely in his wife's satchel; his place was undoubtedly assured in his uncle's office; beside him at the well-appointed dinner table sat Juliet charmingly attired and radiant with happiness, as beautiful and devoted a young wife as any man could desire; while her parents were receiving him in kindly, hearty fashion that caused any blunders in grammar or dropped letters to sink into absolute insignificance in Mark's mind. A genial glow warmed his heart, and as he gave himself up to the enjoyment of feeling that all his troubles were being smoothed away, the thought of Mortimer and of Bertha's words recurred to him.

"Poor fellow! I must hunt him up the first spare moment I get," he thought. "I'll pay him that money, and it will go hard if I can't get him a good position too, probably a good deal better than the one that he has lost, for I don't think he was exactly the kind to get on well with Uncle Palmer. He needs somebody with more 'go.' But old Mort's religion and his steady ways would just suit Mr. Harvey. Maybe after things blow over a bit, I could get him in there."

Mark was convinced that his luck was again in the ascendant, and the day closed with contentment and good cheer.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MARK DEFENDS MORTIMER

WHILE Mark was congratulating himself that all his troubles were safely over, Mortimer was in a very despondent mood. It was a very severe blow to him when he received definite dismissal from his position with Palmer & Davenant.

"I suppose that my mother would say that my faith was not worth much if it grew weak under these tests," he said rather bitterly to his aunt; "but the truth is that I don't think I deserve anything better. I was getting careless, and I suppose that I must suffer for it."

"If we got only what we deserve, which of us could claim any good?" replied his aunt. "The very essence of our faith lies in the conviction that the Lord will not deal with us after our sins, nor reward us according to our iniquities." There was such a bright light in her eyes and happy note in her voice that Mortimer was surprised, and he felt cheered and encouraged as he went out again in his quest for a new position.

It was the morning after his return from Briarley, and the fear of sad consequences from Bertha's foolishly willful step in going directly into the way of contagion, was always present to his mind. Most ardently he longed to be able to write to his mother that he would pay the necessary expense if she would engage a good nurse; but he could not do this unless he had work, as even if Mark repaid what he had borrowed it would soon all be swallowed up by boarding and the unavoidable expenses of life in the city away from his own home. The previous morning had passed in fruitless search, and the afternoon had brought him no better success. He had tried all the places where he had reason to expect that he would find employment, and at last he thought of Harvey & Blake.

"They don't want anybody in Mark's place, so it is useless to waste time trying there," he thought, but his ill success elsewhere reduced him to the unpromising chances, and this morning, after several more rebuffs, he went to Harvey & Blake's.

"You are a friend of Mark Willoughby, I believe," said Mr. Blake, the junior partner, eyeing him in a way that made Mortimer feel decidedly uncomfortable.

Mortimer was surprised to find himself a little at a loss how to reply, but he answered after a slight hesitation:

"We have seen a good deal of each other lately, but now it may be different. A married man does not always keep up the same friendships that he had as a bachelor."

"Perhaps you think it will be well to have done with that friendship," said Mr. Blake in a curiously meaning tone.

"I did not mean to imply any slur on Mark," said Mortimer flushing hotly. "He is a kind-hearted fellow."

"Oh yes, oh yes, I have no doubt of that," replied Mr. Blake. Then he tossed over the morning paper to Mortimer and said carelessly:

"Sit down a moment, will you? till I am at liberty to speak with you again."

Mortimer took up the paper and found that it was opened to the account of a gang of counterfeiters who had been trying to pass fraudulent bank notes. He read listlessly, thinking more of his own affairs than of what he was reading. Presently Mr. Blake, who was an active, wiry little man, with black eyes and hair and a quick, decided way of speaking and moving, came up to him again with an envelope in his hand.

"A bad business that," he said, nodding toward the paper, "It was mainly fifties that they were trying to pass. Did your firm get hold of any?"

"I don't know. I heard nothing about it."

"See here," said Mr. Blake; "pretty good specimens, hey?" and he took two fifty-dollar bills out of the envelope and held them out to Mortimer, eyeing him keenly the while.

"Did you get them passed on you?" asked Mortimer, examining the notes with interest. "They are well done, but I can see the faults, now that you call my attention to them."

"You would not be taken in by them?" queried Mr. Blake. "Neither would I."

"I think that I should detect them," said Mortimer. "But I can't be too sure; for you had called my attention to the matter before you showed me these, and I looked at them closely."

"We have heard something about you from different parties," said Mr. Blake, abruptly changing the subject. "Mr. Davenant and Mr. Harvey are old friends, and Mr. Harvey dines with him to-night. You stop in there in the evening and see Mr. Harvey."

"I should not—I mean it would be like intruding," stammered Mortimer. "I would better see Mr. Harvey in office hours."

"No, no, he won't be here to-day," replied Mr. Blake. "And Mr. Davenant goes out of town to-morrow. You go to-night and see them both."

He evidently considered the interview at an end, and Mortimer was at a loss what to think. His short, abrupt manner was not very encouraging, and the proposal to meet Mr. Harvey at Mr. Davenant's might simply mean that Mr. Davenant would give a bad report of him.

He went out into the street in a state of doubt and depression, and was walking moodily along when his eye chanced to fall on a familiar figure coming toward him. It was Mark Willoughby, and Mortimer's heart gave a bound. He did not know that Mark had returned to town, but now he was eager to meet him and get the mystery explained. A cross street lay between them, and Mark stopped at the door of a carriage that was standing by the curbstone in front of a large store. Mark's glance wandered along the street, and Mortimer felt sure that he saw him, for he turned with a quick movement and put his foot on the step as if to enter the carriage. Then he drew back, said a word to some one inside it, and gave a direction to the coachman. The door closed and the carriage rolled away, while Mark came straight forward to meet Mortimer. He held out his hand cordially, but his manner was nervous and embarrassed as Mortimer had never before seen it, and he cut short all conventional greetings with the words :

"I say, old fellow, come around with me to Uncle Palmer's office. I hear that my uncle has got some crazy notion in his head about you, and we must set it straight."

Mortimer began with eager questions and explanations, but Mark strode along scarcely seeming to hear or heed him. The distance was not great, and they soon found themselves entering the well-known dingy room. Mr. Palmer and Mr. Davenant were both in the inner office, and Mark marched in, beckoning to Mortimer to follow him.

"I say, uncle," he began, "what is all this fuss about Mort?"

Mr. Palmer looked at him in surprise, and did not immediately reply, but Mark continued hurling out his words in a hurry, as though he was afraid to pause lest he should not say it all.

"Mort never had any dealings with Hamilton, I'll be bound; and he never touched a cent that did not belong to him. What is that writing that is making all the row? Just show it to me."

His tone was impatient and imperious, but Mr. Palmer slowly took out the sheet of paper that Hamilton had given him.

"Mort sent me that because I had asked him to lend me money, and he refused; and then, like the good fellow that he is, he thought better of it and sent me this note by his little brother."

"How did Hamilton get it?" asked Mr. Davenant.

"That's easily explained," replied Mark. "I owed the money to Hamilton and he meant to go to my father about it. When Jack brought me these lines from Mort, I was puzzled how I could get word to Hamilton in time to prevent a row, and just at the moment I saw him on the street; so, as I had no time to lose, I pulled Mort's note out and told Jack to run like a good fellow and give it to Hamilton. I did not know that Hamilton knew Mort's handwriting, and the note would do for my own, as you can see. Hamilton knew very well who sent it, for he came to me and got the money."

There was an uncomfortable pause in the room for a moment, then Mr. Palmer asked coldly:

"Did you not deny having had any dealings with Hamilton for months?"

Mark flushed dark red for a second, then he answered boldly: "I did, and I lied about it, as many a man is forced to do when his elders try to hedge him up too closely."

Mortimer's eyes had been fixed on Mark with a look of gratitude and pride, but at the defiant tone and words his brow clouded and he bit his lip.

"All this does not explain what has become of the missing money," said Mr. Davenant. "If Hamilton was interested in the game, he may have had a hand in that."

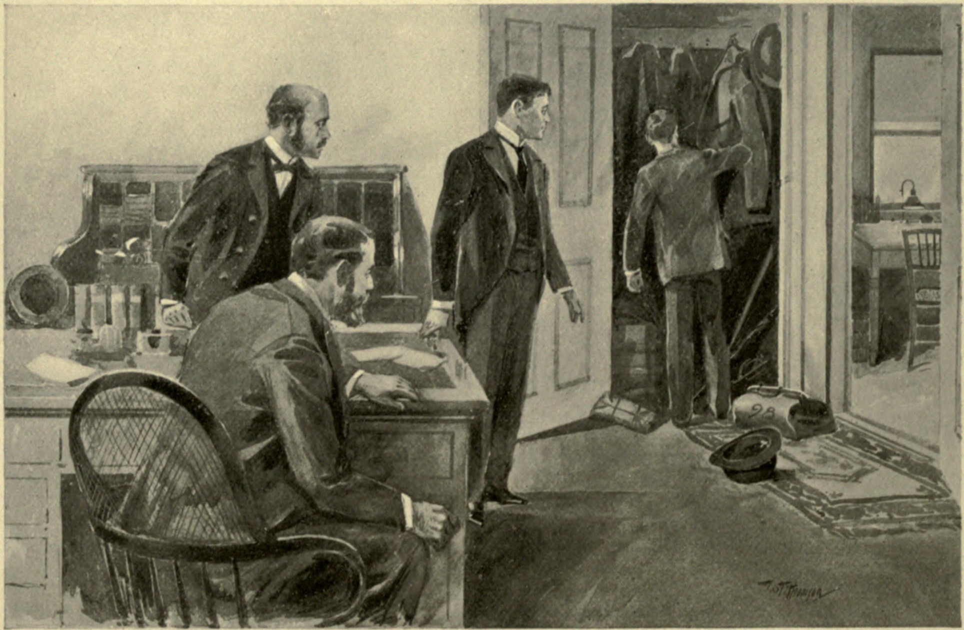
Suddenly Mortimer sprang forward and opened the closet door.

"If Hamilton was in the office that morning, he must have been hidden somewhere while I was here, for I did not see him. I remember closing this door as I went out to see Jack."

"I don't believe that I opened the closet at all," said Mr. Davenant. "I think I flung my hat and coat on the chair."

Mortimer was already ferreting in the closet, which was just large enough to conceal a man. An old summer coat of Mr. Palmer's hung in the farthest corner, and as Mortimer shook it, something dropped into his hand. He fetched it out to the light and discovered that it was a little silver pencil case in the form of a papoose; pressure on the feet caused the pencil to start out of the head. It had also a little ring by means of which it could be fastened to a watch chain.

"That is Hamilton's," said Mark coolly. "I have often seen it on his watch-guard, and when I last saw him I noticed that he had not got it, for he asked me to lend him a pencil. I asked whether he had lost his papoose, and he said no, that it was out of order and he had left it to be repaired."



"The closet, just large enough to conceal a man."

The Merrivale Will. Page 296.

Mr. Palmer sat silent, tapping the desk with his fingers. He did not look at either of the young men, but his brow was very dark.

"I am glad that it is all cleared up," said Mr. Davenant kindly to Mortimer. "I wish that we could get hold of this Hamilton and make him smart for his rascality."

"He knows too well how to take care of himself," replied Mark, with a little laugh. Then he said a jaunty good-morning and walked out, followed by Mortimer.

As soon as they were in the street Mortimer grasped his hand and began to thank him; but Mark only shrugged his shoulders impatiently, exclaiming:

"How was anybody to suppose that they would be such simpletons as to come down on you? Anybody with half an eye might see that you have too much religion in you for any sharp tricks."

"I wish that the same thing could be said of you, Mark," replied Mortimer bluntly. "It is the only safe way."

"Not so safe after all," said Mark jestingly. "It took my intervention, iniquitous though you may consider me, to get you out of that tangle."

"Mark," interposed Mortimer firmly, "you are far too good a fellow to let yourself go in this way. You know well enough that it was a sharp trick that started all the trouble."

"I suppose you mean because I denied having had any communication with Hamilton," retorted Mark sharply. "Well, at all events, I ate my crow without any wry face, though you need not suppose from that that it was pleasant; and as for Hamilton, you don't know the whole of that story, and you can't judge."

Mortimer had no wish to irritate his friend, and he saw that any further words would be taken amiss. At the next turning, Mark said good-bye and left him, and he hurried home to lunch greatly encouraged over the prospect of his visit in the evening to Mr. Davenant. He found a letter from Jessica awaiting him that gave the news that he had dreaded. Bertha was taking the disease, and their mother had two patients to tend instead of one. It flashed into Mortimer's mind that if Mark had only paid him what he owed him he could have sent the money to his mother and managed to scrape along on very little himself; but after the way in which Mark had spoken in his favor, he did not like to dun him for the money, and he had no doubt that it would come soon.

As he went to his aunt's room to read to her Jessica's letter, he met her coming to find him in a tremulous flutter of pleasure.

"My dear boy, here is an invitation for us both to dine at Mr. Davenant's to-night. You will go, won't you?" she asked.

Mortimer agreed very heartily, though he was surprised that his aunt, who usually cared nothing about going out in the evenings, should seem so pleased; but with the unconscious vanity of youth he set it all down to her interest in himself.

When they entered the drawing room at Mr. Davenant's, they found their host conversing with Mr. Harvey, and at the farther end of the room Mrs. Davenant and Myrtle were sitting beside a gentleman whom they seemed to have taken possession of, for Myrtle was leaning upon him in the most confiding manner and Mrs. Davenant's hand was clasped in his, and she did not relax her hold as she rose and held out the other hand to Miss Clive.

Mortimer recognized Mr. Brant, but his amazement almost led him to doubt his own eyes when he heard Mrs. Davenant's sweet, clear voice saying:

"Miss Clive, it is very good of you to come and let me introduce to you my brother, Mr. Brant." Then turning to Mortimer, she added, "You need no introduction, Mr. Winstead, but it is many years since my brother and your aunt have met."

His hostess noted his surprise, and there was a merry glance in her eyes as she took an opportunity, when the others were engaged in conversation, to sit down beside him and give a little explanation.

"You are really the cause of my finding my brother," she said; "for he came in your behalf to Mr. Lindsay's office, and there my husband met him and was struck by the name."

"I thought," said Mortimer, "that your father's name was Stanhope.' I have heard Mr. Davenant speak of Mr. Stanhope."

"Yes, my father, but my mother was Mrs. Brant before she married my father, and Alfred lived with us till he went to college. After that there was an unfortunate misunderstanding between him and my father, and he went West and we lost all track of him; for my mother died soon after he left, and then all correspondence dropped. I was a little child at the time, scarcely as old as Myrtle, but I was very fond of my big brother; and I had good cause to be so, for he petted and spoiled me finely when he was at home.

That Mrs. Brant should be related to themselves had seemed to Mortimer very lucky for the Brants ; but now the idea that Mr. Brant was the brother of such charming and wealthy people as the Davenants, quite took his breath away. He gave a hasty glance around the room, wondering how Mrs. Brant would impress a lady of such taste and refinement as Mrs. Davenant ; and he was inclined to feel vexed at noticing that she was not present, but his hostess seemed to divine his thought, for she said:

"I fear that we must also lay it at your sister's door that my brother's wife is not with us this evening. We were very sorry to hear of your sister's illness. Alfred tells me that your mother is worn with nursing, and his wife has taken the care of your sister Bertha entirely into her own hands."

Here was a new revelation to Mortimer, though he had seen enough of Mrs. Brant not to be at all surprised. He wondered a little how Bertha felt, but the relief to his own mind was very great.

The evening seemed to pass like a dream to him. He heard Myrtle's merry chatter as she recalled the windy night when her uncle had snatched her from the wheels of Mr. Palmer's carriage ; and he heard Mr. Brant's quiet, deliberate tones replying, and telling the child that she looked the image of her mother when he last saw her. Then came a quiet conversation with Mr. Harvey, in which Mr. Davenant seemed to be as deeply interested as Mortimer himself, and the result of all was that Mortimer found himself engaged to fill the position that Mark had left at Harvey & Blake's, only with good prospects of a rise.

He unintentionally caught a few words between Mr. Harvey and Mr. Davenant that worried him on Mark's account. Mr. Harvey was saying something about business in general when he suddenly remarked:

"I can't understand why you were so hard on Harry Neal."

Mr. Davenant's face clouded and he replied :

"That was a mistake. You see I had given Harry my promise without any idea that Palmer intended to act so hastily. In fact he did not mean to do so himself; but he got a telegram from his nephew that alarmed him, and he went and put the check in before I saw him the next morning."

"Well, well, it won't break Neal; he has found friends to help him through and he is really all right. I think I know who was trying to spread reports to injure him; and if I am right, the man is wanted for some rascally work and will have to look out for himself if he expects to keep out of jail. At all events he will have no time for bothering Neal any more."

"You don't mean Graves!" exclaimed Mr. Davenant.

Mr. Harvey nodded, and added: "I'm sorry that Mark had anything to say in the matter."

Mr. Davenant looked uncomfortable, but the subject was dropped, and Mortimer could only conjecture who this Graves might be and what Mark could have to do with him.

He and his aunt went home with light hearts that evening. Mortimer slept more soundly than he had done since the disastrous thirty-first of March; and Miss Clive, if she did not sleep much, lay awake with thankful thoughts crowding her mind as she felt that the evil wrought by her careless words was now being wiped out.

The young rarely guess the romances that may be hidden under gray hairs and withered brows, but Mrs. Davenant was warm-hearted and sympathetic, and she had a secret theory of her own as to why Miss Clive had grieved so bitterly over the mischief wrought to her brother, for she knew that twenty-five years ago the little lady was not a slightly deformed figure but a bright and comely girl with all a girl's enthusiasms.

"I suppose that she was a little older than he, but she would have suited him so well," Mrs. Davenant thought half regretfully. "I wonder whether I shall like his wife as well as I like her."

Miss Clive on the contrary was thinking:

"How his face lighted up when he spoke of his wife. She is a good woman I know, and just the person for him."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE REAL CULPRIT CONFESSES

"I DON'T believe a word of it. It is all a made-up story," said Mr. Palmer doggedly the next day.

"How do you account for the pencil?" asked Mr. Davenant, turning over the little trinket that lay on the desk before him.

"It was Winstead who fetched it out of the closet; and it may have been in Winstead's hand all the time," replied Mr. Palmer. "I do not believe he found it there."

"Oh, come now, that is drawing it too strong," expostulated Mr. Davenant. "Why, even when I thought that Winstead had carelessly lost that money, I did not think he was so tricky as you would make him out. Be fair to the lad."

"I am fair," growled Mr. Palmer. "I had complete faith in the fellow; but when he proved himself unworthy of confidence, I had to protect our interests. No man can say that I have been unjust to him, and no man can boast that he has fooled me twice."

"Mark's story was pretty straight and conclusive."

"Nonsense! I know the quixotic ideas that young men will sometimes get about helping a friend out of a muddle," returned Mr. Palmer.

Mr. Davenant opened his lips to repeat what Mr. Harvey had told him about Harry Neal, but he saw that his partner was irritated and judged it best to avoid any unpleasant topics.

"Erskine is coming out to dine with me to-night," said Mr. Palmer; "and I must go, as I promised to meet him at the station."

"And I must go to see Lindsay about some business that my wife has in her mind," replied Mr. Davenant. "When is Mark going to begin work? This is a desultory way of getting along."

"In a day or two," returned Mr. Palmer. "A young man doesn't get married every day, and of course he wants a little honeymoon."

With these words they parted; Mr. Davenant bound on the errand for his wife, which was to consult Mr. Lindsay as to the best way of arranging for a comfortable income to be paid to Mr. Brant from the large fortune left to her by her father; and Mr. Palmer to show every attention to his nephew's rich father-in-law.

As the carriage that had been sent to meet Mr. Palmer and his guest drove up to the cheerfully lighted house at Briarley, a boy was standing on the steps. As soon as Mr. Palmer alighted from the carriage, he accosted him:

"There's a man sick over to our place who wants to see you real bad."

"Who are you, and where is your place?" asked Mr. Palmer, straining his eyes to see the lad's face through the gathering dusk.

"I'm John Gilbert, sir," replied the lad. "I guess you know our place over by Noman's End."

"That's a long way, my lad," said Mr. Palmer, who was pleasant in his manner to any one who came to ask help if he thought that it was a worthy case. "Is it very pressing?"

"I can't say," replied the boy. "There's a man sick in that old tumble-down house on the Crosley farm; and his wife asked me to come for you, as her husband wanted to see you."

"That is a wretched place. It has no roof," said Mr. Palmer.

"'Tain't much for comfort," admitted the boy; "but they have been there several days."

"See here, don't let me hinder you if you have an errand," said Mr. Erskine.

"Somebody in trouble and needing help, I suppose," said Mr. Palmer, who was pleased to find a chance at hand to be kindly and bountiful, as he was annoyed by the way affairs were turning out in the case of Mortimer Winstead, and did not feel as thoroughly satisfied with his own course as he had tried to lead Mr. Davenant to suppose. "It is a moonlight night. What do you say if we drive over after dinner? You could see a little of the country."

Mr. Erskine readily agreed, orders were given accordingly, and young Gilbert departed.

After dinner was over the two gentlemen started on their drive, taking a light carriage which just held the two. It was, as Mr. Palmer had said, a long drive to Noman's End, and as they approached it the ruined old house loomed up dark and dismal in the moonlight. The chimney rose tall and gloomy with a black patch on the moonlit side, showing where a fireplace had been in the decayed upper story. Down below there was evidently a room that could be made habitable. A faint light shone from the cracks of a closed door and a crazy window shutter. Mr. Palmer got out, tied his horse, and followed by Mr. Erskine made his way over a rickety worm fence and through the brambles to the door.

"Is that you, doctor?" called a woman, as he knocked.

"Is it quite safe?" whispered Mr. Erskine. "It looks as though they might be tramps or pretty bad characters."

"Oh, they won't do us any harm," replied Mr. Palmer carelessly, and raising his voice he called, "No. Did you expect no one but the doctor?"

The door opened and a neat, decent-looking woman peeped out.

"Are you Mr. Palmer?" she asked, and on being answered in the affirmative she pulled the door wide enough open to admit the two gentlemen; for Mr. Erskine, only half reassured, determined not to leave his companion unsupported.

As Mr. Palmer entered he noticed that the woman was much too respectable to belong to the tribe of tramps, and at one time she might have been good-looking; but she had a stolid expression that gave the impression of deficient intellect.

"Robert," she called, approaching a miserable bedstead in the other end of the room, "the boy has took the message and here is the man you wanted to see."

"Bring him nearer, can't you? And set the lamp down. I want to see if it is the right one," gasped a weak, rattling voice, as the figure lying on the bed turned and tossed out an arm.

Something gave Mr. Palmer a shiver as he approached the wretched object, but it was not until the woman had pushed forward a bench for him to sit on, and had placed the lamp on a box beside the bed, that he got a good look at the man's face, and then he recognized under the growth of stubbly red beard the features of Robert Hamilton.

"That's right. You're the man I want," gasped Hamilton. "You think I'm pretty well through, don't you? But I guess I've got enough grit left to say all I want to say."

Mr. Palmer was too much startled and shocked to answer a word, and Hamilton resumed with a feeble attempt at a laugh.

"I suppose this is my confession. Wouldn't you feel bad if you knew what became of that fifty-dollar bill? Well, I'll tell you: I got it. I was in there and skipped into the closet, and when the two fellows went out and left the money lying on the desk I slipped out and grabbed a bill. One wouldn't be missed. Sorry I didn't take more. That man Davenant is easy gulled; he never would have known."

Hamilton stopped to laugh but coughed instead so severely that the woman had to come to his relief with something that she gave him as soon as he could swallow. A heavy frown was settling on Mr. Palmer's brow.

"You see I had been shoving so many queer fifties that I was getting into trouble. I trusted your nephew Mark, and he was not sharp enough, but got spotted. So I had to have some good notes to keep me out of trouble. Awful rascal, Mark was; he went and blabbed after all I had done for him. But he needn't be so high. Got a rich wife, and thought he'd throw me over. But the secret service were after me, and they have got a fine haul. 'Taint my fault that some of Mark's letters got taken with my things, eh? Awfully sorry—can't be helped—but thought you ought to know," and he glared at Mr. Palmer with a look of mock regret and secret malicious glee that made that gentleman's blood run cold.

"See here, Hamilton, or whatever your name really is, what are you telling all this string of lies to me for? Do you expect to get money out of me?"

"Money! No. What do I want of your money?" snarled the man. "My last haul of that at the Winstead place has finished me. But how could I tell that the child had got this killing affair? Children are always sick with something. But I'll get fun out of it; oh, yes! See the man who never was unjust to his employees and has fired an honest lad to make a place for his wife's nephew, a green-goods swindler!" and Hamilton went off into a horrible, mocking laugh, that threatened to strangle him.

Mr. Palmer sat speechless with indignation and something that very nearly resembled fright. The mad ravings fitted in too exactly with what he had already heard for him to take refuge in the conviction that it was all a string of malicious lies. He had entirely forgotten Mr. Erskine, but the sound of still another footstep at the door aroused him, and a voice exclaimed,

"What on earth is this? Didn't I tell you that nobody was to be allowed to come in here?"

The words were addressed in tones of sharp displeasure to the woman, and Mr. Palmer recognized the voice of Doctor Scott.

"He would not be at peace till I sent the message," remonstrated the woman. "I had to let it go."

"Well, if you think that I am going to be at peace while you spread black diphtheria around the neighborhood, you are very much mistaken," replied Doctor Scott. "But of all people, you, Palmer! Why, I thought that you had more sense. Get out of here, both of you, and wait outside for me. Mind, you are not to go home."

Mr. Palmer rose uncertainly to his feet, and as he turned he looked straight into the pale and agitated face of Mr. Erskine.

"Come out of this," Mr. Palmer whispered hoarsely. "It's all lies; the man is crazy."

But Hamilton gathered up his strength to shriek after him: "See the just man! Money, you said. Will money take the stain off of your fine nephew? Will money right all your injustice? Hold up your head if you dare. I only wish you would catch this fever that is taking me off the hooks; but I'm even with you." He flung out his arm in a desperate attempt to catch Mr. Palmer's coat, but the doctor interposed, and with authoritative hand and voice put the arm back, while the two gentlemen hurried out of hearing of the wild ravings.

The chilly April night sent a shiver through Mr. Palmer as he stepped out into the flood of white moonlight; but in the next moment a hot glow of indignation tingled through him as he thought of the way in which he had been twisted around the finger of such a rogue as Hamilton and outwitted by Mark.

"What does all this mean?" asked Mr. Erskine sternly.

"How can I tell?" replied Mr. Palmer irritably. "The fellow is delirious or crazy, as I told you."

"That man is Graves, the counterfeiter, who escaped the detectives," replied Mr. Erskine positively. "Mark my words; I am right. But what has your nephew to do with him?" He had spoken sharply and sternly; but now he exclaimed in an undertone, "Oh, my poor little Juliet! my poor little girl!"

Mr. Palmer winced, and the hasty reply on his lips remained unspoken.

"I am very sorry to have to say it," continued Mr. Erskine; "but you must see that we have not been treated right. I don't say anything about the marriage, for that was not a deliberate plan; but Mr. Willoughby never called on us till yesterday, and his daughter didn't come with him. Oh, he made all excuses for her," he hastened to add, as he saw that Mr. Palmer was going to interrupt. "He said she was not well and would come to-day or as soon as she could be out, and he was civil enough himself. But it is queer. Maybe he knew that all this would come out upon me."

"That I am sure he did not," exclaimed Mr. Palmer. "He has not heard a word of all this string of lies, nor had I till to-night. I am very sorry that I brought you out to have your mind disturbed with such trash."

"The man has some hold on Mark," said Mr. Erskine, shaking his head. "I wish that I could get back to town to-night."

"I don't think that you ought to go back to your family straight from that place," said Mr. Palmer, with a little shudder as he glanced back toward the wretched room.

The two men paced up and down silently after this in the cold moonlight. Neither one cared to speak. Mr. Erskine was absorbed in sorrowful, indignant thoughts of his child, and Mr. Palmer was too bitterly shamed and galled to have a word to say. At last, to their relief, the doctor appeared, and in his usual cheery, hearty tones called to them to get into their carriage without further delay.

"It is well that we have a pretty long distance to go," he remarked to Mr. Palmer, "as it will give our clothes a good airing; but I think that you would better stop at my place and send up for another suit." He glanced curiously at Mr. Erskine as he spoke, and Mr. Palmer, suddenly recalled from his moody reflections, hastened to introduce the gentlemen to each other.

Mark Willoughby's marriage had been talked of at Briarley, and the notice of it had been duly published in the daily papers. Thus the name of Erskine at once caught the doctor's attention. He was shrewd enough to guess that there had been some unpleasant disclosure that evening, and he whistled softly to himself as he mounted his horse and rode after the carriage which was already jolting over the uneven road. As they emerged upon the broad and smooth turnpike which led to Briarley he came up abreast of the carriage, and Mr. Palmer leaned out to inquire:

"Who was that man, and where did he come from?"

"He is the man who robbed Merrivale farmhouse," replied the doctor. "I suspected it as soon as I found that he was laid up with diphtheria in that wretched, ruined place, for nobody had seen him before the date of the robbery, and no doubt he got the disease by going into the room of Mrs. Winstead's sick child. The exposure to wind and rain has made it fasten upon him so viciously. As to his name, I begin to believe that he is Graves, of whom you have of course read in the papers. He goes under other names, however, for Mrs. Brant told me this afternoon that a man who called himself Hamilton came to see her not long ago. She had a feeling that she had seen him before, but she could not recall where until this talk about Graves reminded her of a man who went under that name out in Colorado. What his real name is I don't know, but there was a man named Hamilton who swindled Mrs. Winstead's husband out of a good deal of money."

"Have you taken any steps to have him arrested?" asked Mr. Palmer.

"No," replied the doctor. "I only got the matter clearly in my mind to-night; and the man is dying, so there is no danger that he will run away to do any further mischief."

"What about the money that he stole?" asked Mr. Palmer.

"I shall notify the police and they can search and take all legal steps to recover that," replied the doctor. "Now here we are at my door. Come in and I will send my boy up to the house to fetch clothes if you will give him directions, Palmer."

"I have no other suit with me," remarked Mr. Erskine, "and I think that I would better take the next train back to town. I do not care to alarm the ladies, and of course there might be some risk."

In truth, Mr. Erskine placed very little faith in all Mr. Palmer's assertions that the tale he heard that evening was a string of lies, and he did not care to return to Mr. Palmer's house. Mr. Palmer began to offer a suit of his own clothes, but the two men were of such totally different build that this was obviously useless, and the doctor interposed with a hearty invitation that Mr. Erskine should spend the night with him.

"I'll give you as good entertainment as my bachelor quarters will afford, and your clothes can be thoroughly aired to-night. They may get a touch of frost, for these April nights are pretty cold," he said, and Mr. Erskine gladly availed himself of the friendly invitation.

Thus the matter was settled, and as soon as the messenger returned with his clothes Mr. Palmer departed in a very unenviable state of mind.

"I hope that I did not scare Mr. Palmer with all these precautions," said the doctor; "but really the case is one of the worst I ever had."

"He was not thinking of the disease. He had enough besides that to make him look queer," replied Mr. Erskine. "But I don't want to talk about all that now. If you don't mind, I should like to hear something about these Winsteads. Do they live near here?"

The doctor was started on a congenial topic, and before they went to bed Mr. Erskine was pretty well posted on the Winstead family.

He took leave of his hospitable host very early the next morning, as he was anxious to return to town, and he wished, if possible, to avoid meeting Mr. Palmer on the train.

Mark had already gone out by the time that he reached the hotel, but Juliet met him, radiant with delight, and hastened to inform him that Kate Willoughby had called the evening before and had been very pleasant. This meant to Juliet the prospect of parties and all the bridal gayeties for which she thirsted.

"Would it be too soon to return her call to-day? I think that I ought to go soon," said the girl eagerly; "and I am sure that she will then say something about a reception or some kind of party to introduce me to their friends."

Her father could not bring himself to say anything that might dampen her pleasure, and he kept all his suspicions and forebodings to be shared with his wife, when Juliet was safely out of hearing.

CHAPTER XXX

MARK'S ENTANGLEMENTS

MR. PALMER passed a very restless and harassed night, and his vexation with Mark grew more intense as he realized more fully the extremely unpleasant position in which he himself was now placed. At first he intended to question Mark himself; but as he did not care to meet either Mr. Erskine or Mark's wife, he decided to take the chance that Mark might come to the office. The most of the morning passed without any sign of Mark, and, his patience being sorely tried, he went straight to Mr. Willoughby's. He was told by the servant that Mr. Willoughby was out, but would be home by noon, and he was taken into the library to wait. A gentleman was sitting there, and as Mr. Palmer entered he recognized Mark's former employer, Mr. Blake. After the first commonplace remarks had passed between them, Mr. Blake said:

"I was waiting to see Mr. Willoughby, but I am glad that you came in, for the matter concerns you pretty nearly since you have Mark Willoughby in your office, and you can use your own judgment as to whether you will tell Mr. Willoughby."

They were sitting in the same room in which Hamilton had overheard Bertha's remarks about the Brants; and Mr. Palmer, who knew the house, drew aside the *portière* and glanced into the long drawing room. It was empty, and he let fall the curtain and seated himself to hear what Mr. Blake had to say.

"I don't care to be unpleasant," began Mr. Blake, in his quick, decided way; "but with this fuss coming up in the papers about this gang of counterfeiters, I think that for the young man's sake as well as for your own, you ought to know what fault we had to find with Mark Willoughby before you trust him any farther."

"I did not know you had any fault to find," replied Mr. Palmer shortly. "I understood that you were cutting down, and discharged him because he was the youngest."

"That does very well for the public, just as your excuse for discharging Mortimer Winstead may do, but there was something back of both," replied Mr. Blake.

"How do you know that?" asked Mr. Palmer quickly.

"Winstead told Mr. Harvey about the money that was missing," replied Mr. Blake. "He said that he knew that you were not satisfied with his explanations, and he preferred to tell us the worst that could be said about himself before coming into our employ. I confess that I did not want to take him, because I thought that he was a friend of Mark and very likely the same sort of fellow."

Mr. Palmer frowned and appeared to be about to interrupt, but Mr. Blake held up his hand.

"I don't want to make myself unnecessarily disagreeable," he said, "but this tale you ought to hear, and I'll make it as short as possible. Back in the winter we received some money, and I counted it and put it in the safe. Later Mr. Harvey had occasion to count it, and he found that it was short. He spoke to me about it, and I told him that I had taken nothing from it. The next day I counted the same money and it was all there. I thought that Mr. Harvey had made a mistake, and he was sure that he had not. However we sent the money to be deposited in bank, and got back word that there was a counterfeit fifty-dollar bill among the lot. The only persons besides Mr. Harvey and myself who had had access to that money were the bookkeeper and Mark, and we told the bookkeeper to keep quiet about the matter. Again a small sum was missing, but when we came to examine we found it all right. Now I knew that Mark was having some sort of dealings with that man Hamilton, and I began to distrust him. So I did what Mr. Harvey would not have consented to do. I marked some notes. Mind you, I laid no bait for Mark, I don't believe in that, but I simply marked money that was placed where it was always kept, and where Mark had access to it. Then I was called out of town, and when I returned I counted this money and it was apparently all right."

"What on earth is all this leading to?" exclaimed Mr. Palmer impatiently. "You don't seem to have lost a cent, though you are casting slurs upon my nephew."

"Wait a bit. The notes were all there," said Mr. Blake; "but when I examined there was a counterfeit among them, and the marked one was gone. I tried the same thing again, and again the marked note was gone, but a good one was in its place. The thing puzzled me, and I set on a detective to hunt up those two marked notes; but that very day one of them was paid to me by Harry Neal. When I questioned him he said that he had received it from Mark, and he also told me that Mark had paid him a counterfeit. We kept it quiet, but we took care that Mark no longer had access to money. Then he began to fish about to find out if we had received any counterfeit money, but we would not own that we had."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mr. Palmer again, this time angrily.

"Simply this, that I believe Mark had been borrowing of us and repaying us as it suited himself, in bad or good money. Then he grew scared about this gang being found out, and wanted to get the bad notes back. Mind, I don't say that the young man meant to steal, but when a man begins to borrow without asking permission, he is getting into a habit that doesn't fit with my ideas of a reliable fellow to have about. Mr. Harvey and I talked over the matter and decided to let him drop. Now we have those two counterfeit notes, and of course we don't care to make things unpleasant for you and for Mr. Willoughby. But I think that it is high time that you and he knew about these goings on, and kept an eye on the young man."

"Give me the notes and I'll give you good ones," said Mr. Palmer hoarsely. "Only for heaven's sake continue to hold your tongue about the whole business." The faint sound of a closing door made him start up. Again he drew the heavy curtain and looked into the drawing room, but it was empty as before, and he returned to his chair with a muttered exclamation about eavesdropping servants.

"Well," replied Mr. Blake, "I can't do anything until I consult Mr. Harvey. But I did not intend to talk except to you or to Mr. Willoughby. Mark is married now, and he may reform; still I think that one of you had better give him a hint that the matter is not all unnoticed as he seemed to think. Now as you have heard all that I came to say, I won't wait for Mr. Willoughby. You understand the whole business, and you have your eyes open, so you can't say that you are trusting him in the dark, if you should choose to go on trusting him. My advice is, keep a sharp eye on him. Hamilton is a bad companion for any man." With these words Mr. Blake got up and took his hat.

"Wait a moment; I am going too," said Mr. Palmer. "I must think about this. I don't just care to meet Willoughby at once. I shall see Mark himself first."

"That's a good move," said Mr. Blake approvingly. "Make him understand that a man must have some principle in business. That's where I feel safe with old Harvey. He hasn't the 'go' of many a younger man, but he's honest and high principled to the core. That's the sort of religion worth having."

Mr. Palmer suddenly recalled his own words of sneering at religion in business when Mr. Brant and Mr. Marshall had come to see him, and a very uncomfortable feeling of doubt assailed him as to whether his own judgment was as infallible as he had always hitherto supposed. He said good-bye to Mr. Blake, and turned in the direction of his own office. When he reached it he was met by a telegraph boy with a message. It was from Doctor Scott, and read:

"Hamilton died last night."

He thought a moment, and then calling a messenger boy, sent the telegram sealed up in one of his business envelopes to Mr. Erskine.

"That will ease his mind. If I can be sure that Harvey & Blake will hold their tongues maybe there will be no scandal after all," he muttered to himself. "I wish I could get hold of Mark and find out about those papers."

He could only find Mark by going to the Carlton House, and that he did not care to do; so he sat down to his usual work in a very restless and disturbed state of mind.

He had only begun his work when the sound of a well-known voice in the next room caused him to start, and then the door opened and Mark himself entered with a cheerful, careless air that rasped upon his uncle's irritated nerves.

"I say, Uncle Palmer, it's a shame to let you slave away like this. Give me work to do and I'll set about it to-morrow," he exclaimed.

"Come, come, young man, not so fast," returned his uncle grimly. "Wait till you know whether you are wanted."

Mark stared, but he soon smiled and said good-humoredly:

"Now, uncle, you are not going to come down on me too hard for a harmless little white fib. I knew that Hamilton was a rascal and I didn't want to have anything more to do with him. So what was the harm of denying his acquaintance? Of course if I had known that he meant any harm to Mort, I would have seen him farther before I would have allowed it; and you know I set it all straight just as soon as I learned what was going on."

The easy, careless tone of good-humored expostulation chafed Mr. Palmer, and therefore he began and in no measured terms related to Mark all that he had learned from Hamilton and from Mr. Blake.

"Now," he wound up, "it is plain that this man goes by two names, and he is really the counterfeiter Graves for whom the secret service men have been hunting; and you can see that it is no light matter to have your name mixed up with his and letters of yours, telling I don't know what, found among his effects."

Mark's face had changed under his uncle's cutting words; and he sat frowning and wrathful, biting his lips under his moustache.

"You are very ready to believe the worst of me," he said bitterly; "and you would take against me the word of a man like Hamilton, or Graves, or whatever his name may be. Now I can tell you that the detectives won't find a line of mine among his effects. As for Harvey & Blake, Harvey is getting into his dotage and doesn't know exactly what he does, and Blake thinks himself the brightest man that ever drove a pen or signed a check; and he is vastly mistaken as I'll soon let him know when I get a chance to say a word to him."

"Well, if you can hush the matter up, you would better do it," said his uncle in a quieter tone.

"And you don't want me in here to-morrow; so I suppose I would better hunt up other work," continued Mark in the same proud tone.

"Oh, no, I didn't say that," replied Mr. Palmer hesitatingly. "But of course you can see how unpleasant all this is for me; and," he added, his irritation growing again, "I can't see how you could have been such a fool!"

"There's no need to call any names," said Mark haughtily, and he turned and stalked out of the office.

"The old gentleman was right after all," muttered Mr. Palmer angrily. "I'll be hanged if Winstead's religion isn't worth more than Mark's huffiness, and I have a great mind to ship him oft and get Mortimer back."

Mark meanwhile was hurrying along the street, wrathfully telling himself that he had got among a lot of idiots, and that he would better have stuck to old Harvey, who was at least a good-hearted idiot.

He reached the hotel and went straight to the private parlor where he expected to find Juliet. Instead he found only Mrs. Erskine in a state of great perplexity and distress.

"Juliet came home from a call upon your sister and shut herself up in her room," she said. "I can't make out what is wrong, but she wants to go home at once."

"I'll go and talk to her," said Mark, but he returned in a few minutes and, angrily seizing his hat, flung out of the room muttering, "It is some foolery of Kate's, and I'll have it out with her." He swung along looking neither to right nor left until he reached his father's house, and there he marched straight upstairs to his sister's sitting room.

"What did you say to Juliet this morning?" he demanded as he stood before her stern and lowering. "Come, I'll have no nonsense. Your wretched pride has set you on to make trouble between us."

"I?" exclaimed Kate, amazed and alarmed. "Indeed, Mark, I have tried to be as pleasant as I could. What can you mean?"

"Oh, I know what you women can be," sneered Mark. "Here is Juliet, who has done more to help me along than you ever did—and you can't be content until you have set her wild over some rigmarole. What did you say to her this morning?"

"Not one word," replied Kate spiritedly. "I had to go out, and I left word that if she happened to call she was to be told that I would be in very soon. She did come about noon, and Jane showed her into the drawing room, as she said that she would wait for me. But when I came in soon after twelve, she was gone."

"Well, then, it has been father who has made mischief," exclaimed Mark doggedly, turning away as if to go in search of his father.

"Stop," cried Kate anxiously, fearful lest there should be more trouble between her father and brother. "Papa could not have said anything, for he was out. He came in after me. I am sure of it; for Jane told me that both Uncle Palmer and Mr. Blake came to see papa and waited for him a good while in the library; but they went away before he came in. What is the matter?" she exclaimed quickly as she caught sight of her brother's face which had turned very pale.

"Between you all, I shall be made as bad as you want me to be," he said fiercely. "You could all preach and preach at me, but Juliet was the only one who had the pluck and the wit to help me out of a scrape ; and now they have let their wretched tongues wag in her hearing ; and she is thinking—I don't know what—about me. I can't stay to talk. There has been too much talk already." With these words savagely flung at her, he banged out of the room and went downstairs and into the street, while Kate sat indignant, but trembling with a vague fear.

She had achieved a great victory over her own personal feelings when she went to call on her brother's wife. Her indisposition, which had been her excuse for not going at once, was really the result of her intense disappointment and aversion to the task of making any friendly advances, and it was all the more bitter to be thus unjustly accused by Mark when she had really, as she felt, sacrificed her own inclinations entirely to his comfort and welfare. While these feelings were uppermost she could rest proudly in the consciousness that she had done all and more than he had a right to expect ; but there would arise the true, deep, sisterly love for her only brother ; and the fear assailed her that something might have occurred which would turn the young girl whom she looked upon as very undisciplined and childish, into a nagging, fault-finding wife, and perhaps cause a most unhappy breach between the newly wedded pair.

"If his wife is estranged from him, and he is estranged from me, who is there to exercise any good influence over him?" she thought. "He will be utterly without restraint. But I cannot find him and I can do nothing."

Even while she told herself this she felt rather than actually thought, that she could find Juliet, and a few words with her might smooth out the misunderstanding, whatever it was. It was however too hard for her. To accept the inevitable and try to be quietly courteous was one thing ; to have to act the part of mediator between her brother and this young girl was quite another.

"I can't stay here and think," she exclaimed aloud. "I am going to see Miss Clive; I want to know how Bertha is getting on."

The brisk walk did her good and when she reached Miss Halsey's, Miss Clive herself opened the door to her. The little lady received her warmly and they were soon in interested conversation. Bertha was not very seriously ill; Helen had passed through a severe crisis, and was slowly improving.

"Mrs. Brant has been the greatest assistance," said Miss Clive. "I would gladly have offered my help, but I know that I am only an additional care in a sick-room, for I am not strong enough to be of use."

"It is very strange," said Kate, "that the person whom Bertha disliked so much should be the one to be such a help to her mother, and to take such kind care of herself."

"It only shows what I am learning more clearly every day of my life," said Miss Clive, "that we must trust all our affairs in the hands of God. He alone can judge and rule rightly; and if we pull and strain to gratify our own whims, or to get our own desires, we may be just sliding over the precipice where his hand would have guided us safely along a perilous path."

"I cannot understand that," said Kate in a low voice. "What can one do but try to do one's best?"

"Oh, no," exclaimed her friend warmly. "Our own best is so very poor that it would be absolutely disheartening to be left with no other guidance."

"I cannot see any guide," persisted Kate; but there was a hopeless, distressed tone in her voice that made Miss Clive's heart ache.

"Ask for the guide, and ask for the sight to enable you to see his hand, which is always extended to help," she urged earnestly.

"You mean that I should pray," said Kate. "I do that every day, but I cannot find that it helps me."

"So did I at one time, my dear; but I prayed with a very firm determination in my own mind as to what I could and what I could not do. When at last I began to pray for guidance, feeling that whatever the Lord had for me to do, that I could and would do even if it went contrary to all that I had wished or expected, the result was very different."

"Everybody cannot be like you," said Kate sadly.

"There is the same loving Lord watching over us all," said the little lady earnestly. "What matters it whether we are alike or different, if we are all clinging to his hand and following where he leads us?"

Kate made no reply; but it was a very affectionate "good-bye" that she said as she went away, and that night a hard battle was fought in Kate's heart.

At breakfast Mr. Willoughby remarked:

"Mark came to me for money yesterday. What has happened? He looked very glum. Has he squabbled already with that girl?"

"Oh, no! I am sure that he loves her, and she is very fond of him," replied Kate quickly; and then and there she fixed the resolution that had been wavering in her mind. Directly after breakfast was over she dressed and went out to the Carlton House. Dreading a repulse, she told the bell boy that she would go up at once to Mrs. Erskine's private parlor.

"Mrs. Erskine is in bed with a bad headache," said the boy; "but Mrs. Willoughby is at home."

So Kate went up. She tapped at the door, feeling that the way was being smoothed before her; but when Juliet herself opened it she saw with intense disappointment that there was somebody else in the room. It was an elderly man, respectably dressed, but with weather-beaten face and toil-hardened hands, that showed he had worked hard for the greater part of his life.

"Come in," said Juliet, with slight embarrassment in her tone. "This is Mr. Clark, from Harleytown, Miss Willoughby. He came in this morning to tell me about his daughter who has just been left a widow, and he has also news about people whom you know better than I do. It has to do with the Winsteads and the Brants. Did you know, Kate, that Mrs. Brant is Mrs. Winstead's cousin?"

"Oh, you have got it wrong," replied Kate. "I heard all about it from Mrs. Davenant. Mr. Brant is her half-brother. She and Mr. Davenant are very much pleased at the discovery, and have been making arrangements that will put him in very comfortable circumstances for the rest of his life."

"I don't know nothin' about that, miss," said the man, twisting his hat in his hands. "It's only Mrs. Brant as I know about, her as was a Merrivale. Her father was Felix Merrivale and he come West, and though him and me was pardners and come through a good many rough times together, I never knew nothin' about his family; but after he was killed and I married I moved about a good bit, and only heard of his widow off and on, as you might say. Then my daughter Betsy, she fell in with a man who came out prospectin', so he said. Her mother and me we didn't like him, but Betsy was sot on him, and nothin' would do but she would marry him, and he took her East and we heard nothin' much of her.

"Then Graves came out West again and he hunted me up. His name was Robert Hamilton Graves. Well, he began to talk to me about Felix Merrivale and some money that he ought to have had and his daughter might get if the marriage was proved. I knew all about the marriage, for Felix and me was thick friends at that time, but I didn't believe much that Graves had to say, and I didn't know rightly where the daughter was. Graves, he wanted me to come East with him. He said Betsy was pinin' for some of her folks, and her babies was all dead. My wife was dead and I was gettin' on in years, so I just up and come with him, and we've been livin' round these parts for some time."

"How was it that you never told any one about this before?" asked Kate, who was now thoroughly interested.

"Well, you see," replied the old man, "I didn't know nothin' about the folks, and then Graves, he said as I must hold my tongue till he gave me leave to speak; and Graves wasn't good to Betsy when he got riled, so for Betsy's sake I made shift to keep along on his right side and as quiet as possible. But he died night before last, and Betsy she come straight to me, and she says, says she, 'Just you go to Miss Erskine and tell her my man's dead and I'm ready to do anything she has for me to do.'"

"Did her husband leave her nothing?" asked Kate.

"Oh, he was a bad lot, and the detectives, they come in and seized everything while he was away, and Betsy was off nursing him. Betsy had left the key of their room with me, and the men had me up too; but they let me off, only bidding me be around to tell what they wanted to know when they would call for me. They was askin' about a young man, whether I had ever seen a young fellow, tall and straight, with brown hair and mustache and a pleasant, easy way with him, a swell from what they said. I hadn't, for all the men that had come to see Graves—and I lived in a room just opposite and could see easy enough—was seedy-looking rogues."

Kate and Juliet involuntarily exchanged glances, then Juliet's eyes fell, and she said hastily:

"Would it not be well for this information about Mrs. Brant to be written down, or ought we to send word to Mrs. Winstead?"

"Mr. Lindsay ought to be told," replied Kate promptly. "He is the lawyer who has always attended to the Merrivale affairs. Do you know where Cedar Street is?" she inquired, turning to the old man.

"I don't know much about Harriton," he replied. "I guess though I could ask."

Kate shook her head doubtfully, and at that moment the door opened and Mr. Erskine entered.

"Father can manage it," exclaimed Juliet, and she at once explained to her father the story that the man had related, and asked him how he could get to Mr. Lindsay.

It happened that Mr. Erskine had an appointment with Mr. Lindsay that morning; and he offered to take John Clark to the lawyer's office. Juliet caught at the suggestion, and both girls drew a breath of relief when the door closed behind Mr. Erskine and John Clark and they found themselves alone.

"What does all this mean?" asked Kate anxiously. "Do you know whom the man referred to when he spoke about that young man in connection with Hamilton, or Graves, as he called him?"

"He was talking about Mark," replied Juliet in a low tone. "I know all about it. Hamilton had fooled Mark with counterfeit money, and Mark had passed some of it without knowing what it was. That was what worried Mark so badly of late."

"How did you learn this? I knew nothing of it," said Kate in distress.

"I was engaged to Mark," replied Juliet simply, "and of course he could not be in trouble and I not notice it. It wasn't an out-and-out engagement, for father didn't like it. He didn't think Mark was steady. But it was all the same to me, and I gave Mark no peace till he let me know what was the matter. I saw Hamilton come up to speak to Mark in the street one day after he had put me on the street car, and I knew that it was Betsy Graves' husband. If it had been any one else I could not have done a thing; but I knew that Betsy was my friend. So I made Mark tell me about the letters that he had written to this man asking him for money, and I determined to get them back. I gave Mark five hundred dollars that father gave me to get new clothes, and helped Mark to get back some of the counterfeit money; and then I went to Harleytown and got the letters from Betsy."

"Is that what has made the trouble now?" asked Kate, her face growing paler as she listened to this account.

"What trouble?" asked Juliet unsteadily.

"Mark came to me very angry, because he thought that I had done or said something to annoy you," replied Kate. "But you know that you did not wait to see me yesterday, so I knew that it must be something else that was making trouble, and I came this morning to ask you to tell me what it is. I will gladly set it right if I can."

She spoke very kindly and earnestly, but Juliet only started up, crying distractedly:

"Oh, no! I can't tell you anything. It can't be helped. I only want to get away home out of everybody's sight."

"But we cannot spare you or Mark," said Kate gently; "and you surely would not go without him."

"I can't see him again!" cried Juliet. "Don't ask me any more. Ask your uncle—he knows—he heard all."

All Kate's persuasions could draw no more out of her; and Kate was forced to leave in perplexed ignorance as to the real cause of the trouble. But she was convinced that it was no mere whim on Juliet's part, as she had at first supposed. The girl's grief was too real and too deep. She went straight to her uncle's office to question him. Mr. Palmer answered evasively; but at last, finding that she knew about the connection with Graves, he said:

"The fact is that Mark has got into a bad scrape. He paid a bad note to Harry Neal, and Harry took it to Mr. Blake. Mark tried to get the note back from Harry without actually telling him that it was bad; but Harry only said that he had paid it out, and never gave any intimation that he had found it was bad. For Harry didn't know quite how to take Mark, whether to distrust him or not."

"He used to be very friendly with Mark," said poor Kate sadly.

"Yes, and I believe he would have been so still, but he learned that Mark sent me the word that made me hurry to draw on their firm when they were in a tight place, and that turned Harry dead against Mark, and he has told the whole story of the counterfeit bill. It is no use to try to hide it now."

Kate grew very white, but she rallied bravely and exclaimed indignantly:

"It will only show that Mark was deceived by that bad man. But this is not what is troubling Mark's wife. It must have been something that she heard at our house yesterday."

"When was she there?" asked Mr. Palmer uneasily.

"She came about noon and waited a little while for me, but left before I came home," replied Kate. "What did you tell her?"

Mr. Palmer drew in his lips with an almost inaudible whistle.

"I did not see her at all," he said hastily. "There, never mind. It is only a tiff; leave them to settle it themselves."

But Kate was not to be thus put off, and at last he was obliged to tell her the whole story that he had heard from Mr. Blake. She looked so stricken that her uncle heartily wished that he had taken her home before he was led into the conversation.

"Mark—Mark take money that did not belong to him!" she moaned. "Oh, it can't be, it can't be!"

"Come, my dear, don't take it too harshly," he said. "You know he repaid it all; and I don't believe that he had any idea the notes were bad."

Kate only shook her head. She felt that all Juliet's strange conduct was fully explained. But this knowledge only showed her all the more plainly what a dangerous breach might have come between the young husband and wife. Putting aside her uncle's kindly offer to walk home with her, she hastily left the office; but once in the street, she had to pause a moment to gather up her resolution. Then she hurried with steady steps to the Carlton House.

Juliet was still in her room when the message was brought to her that Miss Willoughby wished to see her. She held in her hand the package of letters that she had gotten from Betsy Graves, and she was loosening the string with the intention of throwing them on the fire that burned cheerily in the open grate. For a moment she hesitated, half inclined to send down word that she was engaged; but changing her mind, she laid down the papers and bade the boy show Miss Willoughby to her room. When Kate entered, Juliet saw at the first glance that Kate had learned all that there was to learn, and she greeted her with erect head and defiant air that sent the blood tingling to Kate's cheeks. For one brief moment love and pride battled within Kate's breast. Then she said very gently and wistfully:

"I have been to Uncle Palmer and I have heard all. But now I come to you. Surely his wife and his sister can fight against the evil tendencies and temptations that are threatening to ruin him; and with God's help we shall save him. For, oh, Juliet, he is not willfully bad; don't believe that of him! I have known him all our lives, and I know that he is weak at times; but he has not Mortimer Winstead's religion to guard him, and young men have so many temptations. He loves you so deeply, Juliet, that you can influence him. He said to me yesterday that you had done more for him than I had ever done."

"Well, I think I have done a good deal for him," interrupted Juliet proudly. "See, here are the letters that I got for him from Betsy Graves, because he was afraid that Graves would use them to mix up his name with that counterfeiting gang."

"May I look at them?" asked Kate eagerly.

"Yes; I guess he would not mind," replied Juliet carelessly. "I was just going to burn them to keep them out of anybody's hands who might use them to do him harm; for I don't want to hurt him, though I don't expect ever to see him again," and she turned away to hide a quiver of her lips and a sudden mist of tears in her eyes.

Kate took up the package and read over the contents.

There were several letters saying that parties whose names she did not know were eager for the promised dividends, and telling Hamilton that he would better send on what he had, or they would grow troublesome. The wording of the letters was such that it was impossible to tell whether the writer knew that the money for which he asked was counterfeit. They might easily have been believed to be letters of an accomplice, but at the bottom of the package was one slightly singed that Kate read with some difficulty. It was a hot and indignant protest that Hamilton had sent him bad money, and it ended with the words :

"Of course I shall redeem all that I can get hold of, and if you are going into that sort of a game, you and I will part company."

"Oh, you ought not to burn that !" cried Kate eagerly. "I don't think you could have read it before you set fire to it."

"I did not set fire to any of them," replied Juliet. "Betsy told me that her husband had burned some letters, and this one he was just holding over the flames when somebody came to see him and he had to stop. She thinks that the man was Denville, the one who planned all their counterfeit work and who is now in the hands of the police. At all events her husband was so absorbed by the news this man brought him that he went out without giving any thought to these letters, and I came just afterward and got them. She was sorry that any had been burned when she found that I wanted them. But Mark, when I told him, only said, 'All right ; what he has burned can do no harm.' That was what put it into my head to burn the rest."

"Keep them carefully," said Kate, shaking her head. "We cannot tell what use they may serve. Of course, it would be far better if Mark's name could be kept out of the whole business. But if he has been implicated, as I fear is the case, these will show that he is not an accomplice."

Juliet looked thoughtfully at the letter that Kate had been reading; then she raised her head and said with an evident effort, "I think I will tell you something that happened to-day. I see that you are very fond of Mark, and I can trust you."

She looked at her wistfully, and Kate felt the tears filling her eyes as she realized more fully how much true affection this girl, whom she had thought frivolous and superficial, had for her brother.

"There was a man here this morning inquiring for Mark," continued Juliet. "I saw him as I was in the parlor downstairs, and I beckoned to the bell boy and told him just to say that Mr. Willoughby was out. The man was standing in the office and he did not see me, but I have been so nervous ever since. Yet I dared not tell anybody, as I was afraid it might do harm. I think the man was a detective."

Kate could not repress a nervous start, but at the same moment the door opened and Mark himself entered. He paused a moment in surprise, and his face darkened as his eyes fell on Kate, but he said hastily, "Juliet, have you those papers you got from Graves' wife? I want to show them to a man in the sitting room."

"You were right, Kate," exclaimed Juliet. "Here they are," she said, holding them out to her husband. "I am so glad that Kate advised me not to burn them."

"So am I," said Mark. "It would have put me in a fix if they had been burned." But he was evidently more occupied in noticing his wife's eager and friendly manner than in considering the papers.

"May we come with you?" she asked urgently.

He quickly drew her hand through his arm and, with Kate following, they went down to the private sitting room, where they found Mr. Palmer and a stranger awaiting them.

The papers were opened and examined by the stranger, and a good deal of low conversation passed between the gentlemen. Then the stranger turned to Juliet and remarked: "I was told that Betsy Graves was seen to go out one stormy night, and that she met Mr. Willoughby at the Harleytown station. Of course, when we failed to find papers that we were told were among her husband's effects we supposed that she had carried them away."

"It was not Betsy," replied Juliet, who seemed to have recovered all her composure. "Perhaps your informant was misled because Betsy lent me her umbrella, as I had none. But it was I who got these letters from Betsy and took them to Mr. Willoughby. But they have been in my possession ever since, for he only looked at them and did not take them from me."

Again there was some low conversation between the gentlemen. Then the stranger remarked aloud:

"Of course, this puts a different face upon the matter; but we shall look upon you, Mr. Willoughby, as an important witness in the case."

Mark bit his lip under his mustache, but he simply replied that he would be in readiness when called upon; and the stranger rose and, bowing to the ladies with a brief apology for the trouble that he had given them, went out, followed by Mr. Palmer.

"You must thank Kate," said Juliet, her eyes shining through a mist of tears, as she laid her hand on Mark's arm and with the other caught Kate's hand.

But Kate, seeing that the coldness between the young husband and wife had passed away, was now anxious to be gone. She felt that her presence was no longer needed and now began to feel the strain under which she had been all the morning, and longed to get home and be alone. With a warm pressure of the hand to her brother and his wife, she hurried out of the room and hastened homeward.

CHAPTER XXXI

FELIX BRANT'S ARRIVAL

THE fickle April sun was shining warmly and brightly into the deep-set windows of Mrs. Winstead's bedroom at Merrivale, and it gleamed on the wan faces of two invalids who were now progressing slowly but surely on the way to recovery.

"Come, dear, drink it while I tell you about the big snowstorm we had at Silverbush, when my boy Felix nearly got lost," said Mrs. Brant to Helen in her cheerful, decided tones, as she propped the child more comfortably and held a glass of milk to her lips.

Helen was beginning a fretful complaint; but the promise of a story changed the current of her thoughts, and she contentedly settled herself to listen. The plump, rosy child had changed to a thin-faced little damsel, with close-cropped hair and almost unnaturally large eyes, while a weary, fretful look, quite unlike her former merry smile, frequently marred her face. Bertha marveled at the alteration in her little sister; but Mrs. Brant seemed to take it all as a matter of course, and skillfully coaxed and amused the child, thus procuring for the tired mother an hour of much-needed rest.

Bertha herself was still weak, but her illness had not told upon her as severely. Still she was greatly changed. The old self-confident look was gone, and in its place was a gentler and more thoughtful expression. She sat watching as Mrs. Brant talked brightly to Helen, and finally persuaded the child to lie down and soothed her into a quiet sleep. Then as she rose to leave the room, Bertha rose too and followed her.

"Do you want anything, or is it just for company's sake?" asked Mrs. Brant sympathetically.

"Let me do something useful," said Bertha with a little smile. "I feel so lazy and useless."

"The land's sake! child, don't worry your head. You'll soon be as spry as the best of us," replied Mrs. Brant, as she energetically attacked a bag full of unmended stockings. "Just have a little bit more patience."

"You have plenty of that," replied Bertha, watching her with eyes in which a little moisture was gathering.

"Whatever put that in your head?" exclaimed Mrs. Brant with a laugh. "That ain't one of my virtues. Felix he says that I'm never content unless I can make things hum; and I guess he is about right. Now, my husband is the patientest man living. I can admire him, but I can't come up to him," she ended, with a whimsical little shake of her head, and ran the long darning needle vigorously into a big hole in the heel of one of Jack's stockings.

The language was not more refined and correct than Bertha had anticipated, and Mrs. Brant in her plain house gown was neither beautiful nor elegant, although she was neat enough; but the effect upon Bertha was widely different from what that young lady could have believed possible a few short months before, and she replied most heartily and sincerely:

"I know that you have been very patient and kind to me during my illness; and I wonder how you can be so patient with Helen now."

"Oh, poor child, it's weakness makes her fussy," replied Mrs. Brant. "There ain't a sweeter-tempered child going when she's well. I don't make any account of a little fractiousness now. Why, bless you, it just shows that she is getting better." And again she laughed.

"But you had no reason like that for being so kind to me," said Bertha, her face flushing. "Oh, Cousin Joanna, I was very disagreeable and unjust in my thoughts of you; and that was what took me away to Harriton, and was really the beginning of all this trouble for Mortimer."

"There now, don't say another word about it," said Mrs. Brant kindly.

"But it does not seem right to make you think me better than I am," persisted Bertha remorsefully.

She was trembling a little, but she forced herself to go on; for she had too much self-consciousness not to have noticed that Mrs. Brant had been attracted by her good looks and her attractive manners, and she was determined, as the first step in her new desire for improvement, to try to show herself just as unlovely as she had really been. To her surprise Mrs. Brant took her face between her two hands, and kissing her forehead, replied :

"There, dear, say no more about it. I knew all that you thought. That man Graves—I thought I ought to know his face when he came here so bold calling himself Hamilton, but I couldn't get it just then—he told me all about you, and did his level best to make mischief, but he didn't succeed; and I guess you won't neither," she finished playfully.

"I never spoke to him," said Bertha, bewildered. "I never saw him. Oh, yes, I did once for a minute," she exclaimed, and then a recollection of her words to Kate rushed over her, and a still deeper crimson reddened her pale cheeks.

"Like enough, child," Mrs. Brant was saying indifferently. "He could lie to beat anything I ever did see."

But Bertha interrupted her: "I am afraid it was all truth, and that he did overhear some very ugly words that I spoke; and I want to ask you to forgive me," she said in low, ashamed tones.

"There, there, don't say another word about it," said Mrs. Brant, looking positively uncomfortable. "You didn't know us then, and I hope I'll always turn out better on closer acquaintance. I've been a young girl in my day, and I've said hasty words that I regretted. The Almighty didn't lay them against me; and what for should I lay up anything against you? So put that all out of your head."

"I shall remember it as a lesson that I want never to forget," said Bertha as she kissed her cousin affectionately.

A murmur of voices downstairs attracted their attention at that point. While they had been talking, two gentlemen had come up the path to the front door, and Jessica, who was near the window, had recognized in one of them Mr. Guy Atherton. Anxious that her mother should not be disturbed, she had gone herself to the door, and when Mr. Atherton asked for Mrs. Winstead she asked him to come in.

"You need not be afraid," she said. "We have been thoroughly fumigated and the doctor considers us quite safe now."

"Do not disturb your mother if it is inconvenient," said Mr. Atherton, who had really come with the secret hope of seeing another person than Mrs. Winstead. "My friend has come to see Mrs. Brant. She is an old friend of yours, didn't you say?" he added, turning with a whimsical look to the young man, who smiled but made no reply.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow with a frank sun-burned face that attracted Jessica.

"I will call Mrs. Brant," said Jessica, who by this time had ushered them into the parlor. "She is upstairs with Helen. We are trying to make mamma take plenty of rest now. She was pretty well worn out."

"Pray, don't disturb her," said Mr. Atherton eagerly. "How are your sisters? I heard of the illness in your family only last evening when I arrived in town. If I had not been away I should have come out to inquire before now."

"Oh, they are very much better," replied Jessica. "Helen was the worst, but she is really over it now, though she is still dreadfully weak. Bertha too, is not strong yet."

"Perhaps she is not able to see her friends yet," said Mr. Atherton tentatively,

"Yes, a little," said Jessica, who was beginning to feel uncomfortable under the close scrutiny of the stranger, who studied her face all the time that she was talking with Mr. Atherton, as if he thought that he ought to know her. She now turned to him, and said:

"I am going to tell Mrs. Brant that you wish to see her. Shall I give her your name?"

"That does not matter," said the young stranger in a frank, full voice that seemed to bring a fresh breeze from open-air life into the room. "Just say it's somebody from the West who wants to see her."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, and Jessica still stood in the parlor doorway, when a rush was heard on the staircase, and Mrs. Brant herself came flying into the room more rapidly than Jessica had believed possible for her short and rather stout figure.

"Felix!" she exclaimed, as she reached up almost on tiptoe to fling her arms about the neck of the tall youth. "Oh, you silly boy! Did you think that you would fool your old mother?" Between laughing and crying she clung to him, and for the moment both mother and son forgot that there was any one else in the room.

Mrs. Brant however speedily recovered herself, and with a bright color in her cheeks and a proud light in her eyes she turned to Jessica.

"This is my boy, Felix," she said. "Now, Felix, this is Jessica; and she's just been the nicest kind of a daughter to me, as you know, I'm sure, from the letters I've written you."

For the moment Jessica looked really pretty as the color flew to her cheeks, and her eyes met those of Felix shyly but with an expression of naïve pleasure at his mother's unexpected praise. She shook hands with Felix with a pleasant word of greeting, and then she introduced Mr. Atherton to Mrs. Brant, for in Bertha's absence Jessica had been naturally more in the position of eldest daughter, and she had improved greatly in self-possession and attention to the little formalities that had before fallen to Bertha's share.

At the same moment Bertha herself entered the room. She had overheard the greeting between Mrs. Brant and her son, and had come down to show at once her friendly feeling. But the consciousness of her treatment of his parents, and the uncertainty as to what his mother might have written to him, made it an embarrassing ordeal to her; she looked ill and was lacking in her usual graceful self-possession.

"You will have a great deal to talk over together," she said to Mrs. Brant. "And I think, if Mr. Atherton does not mind, we will take him into the schoolroom. It has been so long unused that he will not be shocked now with a litter of slates and copy-books."

Mr. Atherton, who desired nothing better than a chance for conversation with her, readily agreed, and they left mother and son to the uninterrupted enjoyment of their first meeting after so many months of separation.

Guy was greatly shocked at the change that Bertha's illness had wrought in her appearance, and for a time he was hardly able to carry on the easy conversation that he knew would be the proper thing. But some inquiries that Bertha made concerning Kate set him at ease.

"It is really wonderful what she has accomplished," he said. "Of course you know how she felt about her brother's marriage; but she seemed to put her own feelings entirely aside, and to do all in her power to make things go smoothly. His wife was a good deal upset when she learned of the way he had been mixed up in Hamilton's schemes, and then that affair at Harvey & Blake's. Well, I confess that staggered me a little. The other was, no doubt, all a plot of Hamilton's to deceive Mark; but this was pretty bad, and just the kind of thing that starts many a man on the down track."

"I suppose that a young man who has so much money doesn't feel the same about a thing like that," said Bertha. "He must have felt that he could easily repay at any time what he took."

Guy shook his head. "That is all very well if it is a question of borrowing," he said; "but a man can't be other than very particular and exact when he has access to other people's money, I don't care how much he may have of his own."

"I am glad that you think so," said Bertha warmly. "That is just what our mother always taught us, and it is the way that Mortimer thinks and feels."

Guy's face lighted up and he was on the point of replying when Mrs. Winstead's entrance put a stop to the conversation, and Bertha, feeling weary and dissatisfied with herself, drew more into the background. Guy was charged with a message from Mr. Lindsay concerning the rearrangement of the property that was rendered necessary since John Clark's testimony had proved beyond any legal doubt that Mrs. Brant was the child of Felix Merrivale.

"I must say that I think it is a great pity that this man Clark has turned up," said Guy frankly. "The Brants no longer need this inheritance, as Mrs. Davenant has insisted upon making over to her brother a very liberal share of the property that came to her from her father. She says that she knows that she is only carrying out her father's wishes, for he regretted his hasty judgment of his stepson, and would have been glad to set matters on a more pleasant footing before he died, if it had been possible. It does seem a great pity that you should be cramped when they do not need it."

"I do not regret anything," said Mrs. Winstead. "The whole has been arranged for me, and my only anxiety is to do just what the Lord would have me do, trusting all the consequences to him."

Her quiet, gentle tone, and the evident sincerity that shone in her face, impressed Guy singularly, and he answered impulsively, "I wish that more of us could feel as you do, Mrs. Winstead."

"I think that it is acting that brings the feeling," said Mrs. Winstead simply. "If we act as though we trusted the Lord, the feeling is sure to follow. Sometimes we wait to feel right before we try to act right, and we are disappointed."

Guy could not divine what brought such a flush to Bertha's pale face at her mother's words, but he was quick to note the loving glance that passed between mother and daughter, and he rose to take leave with the conviction that Bertha had never before looked so attractive.

"There is one thing that Mr. Lindsay thinks is pretty sure," he remarked. "Mr. and Mrs. Brant do not intend to press this settlement of the property."

"It does not rest with them," said Mrs. Winstead quickly. "They cannot give up what would properly descend to their son. How did he happen to come on so suddenly?"

Guy only answered vaguely, for he did not care to tell Mrs. Winstead what he believed to be the truth. He was, in fact, convinced that this was another device of Hamilton's to make mischief. He had met Felix in Chicago, and had picked up enough during their journey to assure himself that Felix was coming East under the impression that his parents were being cheated out of their rights; and he had taken the young man to Mr. Lindsay as soon as they arrived in Harriton. To the lawyer Felix had poured out his wrathful indignation; but the astute little gentleman had quieted his excitement, and had recommended him to go out to Merrivale and to see for himself how matters stood. Felix went fully expecting to return with Guy; but the welcome that he received took him by surprise; and when Mrs. Winstead insisted in the kindest manner that she could find room for him, and that he must not think of leaving them, he consented to remain. Guy returned to town alone, inwardly envying the luck of the Western lad.

Mr. Brant was not at home, and the mother and son had an opportunity to talk over many things before he arrived. The news that Graves had been to see his mother under another name excited Felix greatly, and he told his mother exactly what Guy Atherton had suspected, that it was a letter from Hamilton which had caused him to come East so suddenly and unexpectedly.

"I should not have paid the slightest attention to the letter if I had known that it came from Graves," he said indignantly. "And of course the fellow was sharp enough to guess that. Well, these cousins of yours look like nice people, mother. Your girl Jessica is the best looking of them all, for the others are so pale and washed out."

"Bertha has been ill, and her mother is worn out with nursing," remarked Mrs. Brant; but inwardly she was greatly pleased with his remark, for Jessica remained the prime favorite with her.

Mr. Brant came in soon afterward, accompanied by Mr. Palmer, and great was his surprise to find his son. Mr. Palmer too was surprised to meet such a tall, strapping fellow. He had almost forgotten the fact that Mr. Brant had a son, and all his thoughts this morning were fixed upon Mrs. Winstead's boys. He was most thoroughly vexed with the part that he had played in the matter of Mortimer and Mark.

Although it was evident that Mark had been the dupe of Hamilton, Mark's reputation had suffered seriously. The death of Hamilton had relieved him from the necessity of appearing at all in the trial of the counterfeiters, and thus his name was not likely to be paraded before the public, but among all Mr. Palmer's and Mr. Willoughby's acquaintances the facts were more or less known. Mr. Erskine had shown himself both sensible and friendly, for he strongly advised that Mark should try starting in business in a new place. His home was in Chicago, and he had many friends there. He therefore urged that the young couple should make their home for a time with him, and he would do all that he could to get Mark successfully settled.

Mr. Palmer was very thankful to be relieved from any further responsibility about the young man, and he at once began to throw out hints as to his willingness to take Mortimer back on more advantageous terms. But Harvey & Blake were not inclined to make any change, and Mortimer himself had altered the opinion that he had expressed to his mother in November, and now felt safer with an employer like old Mr. Harvey, whose sturdy Christian principle could always be relied upon, although Mr. Palmer was considered a much better man of business.

Since nothing could be done in that quarter, Mr. Palmer's thoughts turned toward Jack. He knew that Mrs. Winstead was likely to find herself seriously crippled by the terms of Miss Merrivale's will, and the unexpected proofs that the Brants were her cousins; and it occurred to him that he might take Jack in hand and give him a start in life, as he expressed it. This was what he had come to suggest to Mrs. Winstead, but to his surprise she did not seem very willing to agree to his proposal.

"I thank you most heartily for your kind thought," she said gently. "But I have always desired to give Jack a good education before deciding upon any calling for him, and I hope that I can still effect that. Mr. Brant has been so very kind in helping him that I think he will not fall behind, even if I cannot spend as much as I had intended; and with patience and economy I think that he may still hope to enter college when he is far enough advanced."

Mr. Palmer renewed his offers, but he had to go away feeling that he had been unable to make any recompense for his wrong judgment in the case of Mortimer, as it was very plain that Mrs. Winstead did not intend to accept his assistance. Bertha, to whom she told Mr. Palmer's offer, asked:

"Would it not be a relief to you to feel that Jack was provided for?"

"No," replied her mother, "for I should not feel content to have him under the care of one who does not have sound Christian principles as the foundation."

Bertha said no more. She was beginning to understand more fully the words, "In *all* thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." She knew that it had always been her mother's motto, but she was only just beginning to appreciate for herself what it meant to consider first the will of the Lord in *all* things.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CLAIM ON MERRIVALE SETTLED

MR. and Mrs. Brant had talked over the effect that it would have upon Mrs. Winstead and her children if Miss Merrivale's will was carried out, and Mrs. Brant had firmly declared that she would not touch one cent of the money. Mrs. Winstead however had insisted to Mr. Lindsay that all should be arranged exactly as Miss Merrivale had specified. She knew, and Mr. Lindsay was also aware, that while Mr. and Mrs. Brant might be most heartily willing to give up their share of the inheritance, their son might think very differently.

"Mrs. Brant is evidently accustomed to rule," said Mr. Lindsay, with an amused twinkle in his eyes as he recalled his former interview with the resolute lady, "but her son is not at an age yet when he can legally endorse her actions, and he might at some future time resent the loss of property."

The attitude of Felix on the night of his arrival proved the truth of Mr. Lindsay's words, and Mrs. Winstead was glad that matters were already so far advanced toward a settlement.

Mr. Lindsay had planned and worked to avoid the necessity of selling the Merrivale farm, and Mr. Brant had aided in this by saying that he had decided not to accept his sister's offer to purchase a house for him in town, but to continue to live with Mrs. Winstead's family, if they would consent to that arrangement. He was very anxious to undertake mission work among the poor in Harriton, but the easy distance from Briarley made it not only possible but advisable that he should continue to reside in the country, as the doctor considered it much better for his health.

Mrs. Winstead received this suggestion with thankful pleasure, as it spared them any search for a new home and also insured the continuance of the care and daily instruction that Jack had received from Mr. Brant. The boy was being greatly benefited in his studies and still more in his general training and formation of character by the wise and kindly guidance that the scholarly Christian man unobtrusively exercised over him.

The arrival of Felix seemed for the moment likely to upset all the pleasantly arranged plans. It was soon evident that he had given up his distrust of the Winsteads and was inclined to be very friendly; but naturally he and his parents would prefer their own home.

"Never mind, dear mamma," said Bertha. "We can do very well in Harriton, and I shall try to get back my pupils."

She spoke cheerfully, but inwardly she dreaded the return to Harriton; and she feared that her hasty action in leaving her pupils so suddenly had seriously injured her chances of finding more, or even of regaining the old ones.

Mortimer, who ran out to see them all whenever he was able to spare the time, took a very hopeful view of everything; for he was doing so well himself that he began to plan to relieve his mother of anxiety about the support of the younger ones. But all these plans were based on future prospects.

"I shall soon rise," he said confidently. "Really all this trouble seems to have gained me more friends. Mr.

Harvey and Mr. Blake treat me in the kindest manner possible, and Mr. Davenant is very friendly. Mr. Palmer seems to be very sorry that he distrusted me. In fact he said more than I ever expected to hear from him, for I know he is not the kind of man who likes to own himself mistaken. Then Mr. Lindsay and Mr. Atherton always speak to me in the warmest way, where formerly I don't think that they ever gave me much thought. Yes, I shall do pretty well now; and as for this new cousin, he seems a pleasant, straightforward sort of fellow. I don't believe that he will want to make any difficulties. I do feel awfully sorry for Mark; but perhaps it will prove a good thing for him in the end. You will go in to see his sister, won't you, Bertha?—as soon as you feel strong enough," he finished.

Bertha consented rather unwillingly, for she dreaded meeting Kate; but she was beginning to put resolutely in practice her determination to think more of others and less of herself, so as soon as her mother would permit it, she went into town to call on Kate. There, to her surprise, she met the young bride, pretty, lively, and voluble as ever, eagerly discussing with Kate the arrangements for a party that was to be given in her honor.

"I ought to thank you again, Miss Winstead," she said gayly, "for the great assistance that you rendered me. I know it did seem rather mean to take advantage of you in that way; but I had just bought my ticket to go out to see Myra Clapp, and I did not want to go back to the ticket office and set that young clerk there wondering by buying another ticket for another place. If he had not known me it would not have made any difference; but I was afraid he would talk and maybe tell father, or somebody who would repeat it, where I had been."

Bertha assured her that she had been very willing to render her any assistance, and the discourse returned to the party. Bertha sat quietly listening and wondering at the odd mixture of frivolity and earnestness that seemed to be bound up in Mrs. Mark Willoughby. She also marveled to note how gently and with how much tact Kate took it all. Bertha could divine that it was all rather a strain upon Kate, but there was nothing to betray that fact to any one less used to Kate's moods than Bertha was. After Juliet took leave, it is true that Kate seemed to breathe more freely and to relapse more into her old cheerful and impulsive self; but there was not one word of unfriendly criticism of her sister-in-law. Kate was evidently starting on a new path, and Bertha blushed as she learned from her friend's conversation that it was her Aunt Rachel who had influenced her. Bertha was too honest not to own to herself that she, in all her intimacy with Kate, had not given a single word that might attract or assist her to higher and holier aims.

Kate, however, seemed very glad to see her, and the visit was a pleasure to Bertha. As she was leaving, Kate insisted that she must come to the party which was to be given in Juliet's honor, and Bertha reluctantly consented.

"I suppose that you will be in town by that time," Kate remarked, "as your pupils will be anxious to commence again."

Such Bertha found to be the case. She took the opportunity of this her first trip to Harriton, to call upon the most of her pupils and to explain her illness, and to see what arrangement could be made to resume and bring up dropped lessons. The result was so satisfactory that she determined that she ought to lose no time in returning to Miss Halsey's, and she felt greatly encouraged as to the prospect of helping her mother. It was a trial now to leave Merrivale with the thought that possibly she would not be able to return there again, except to pack up for a final breaking up of the home, but she remembered how willfully she had left it a few months before, and she repressed all her own regrets and tried hard to show only a bright and cheerful face to those about her.

Mr. Lindsay was one of the friends whom she met first on the street as she was going about to her lessons, the day after she returned to Miss Halsey's, and when he reached his office he happened, in talking over the Merrivale case with Mr. Atherton, to remark:

"Bertha Winstead looks thin and pale after her illness; but she is going at her work again with a commendable spirit."

"What! Is she in town again?" asked Guy with sudden interest. "It does seem a shame that she should have to work—I mean, that they should all be cramped by this stupid clause in Miss Merrivale's will."

"I do not believe that there will be eventually the least difficulty in settling all that quite amicably," replied Mr. Lindsay. "Young Brant will be of age in another year, and I don't doubt that he will join with his parents in giving a full release to the Winsteads. But of course it will be the most satisfactory if he unites in any such action on the part of his father and mother, therefore I strongly advise both Mr. and Mrs. Brant to let matters rest till he comes of age."

"Mr. Palmer wants to take up Felix," remarked Guy.

"How did you hear that?" asked Mr. Lindsay in surprise. "I should not think that desk-work would suit a lad fresh from the open-air life of the Western prairies."

"I heard it from Mr. Palmer himself," replied Guy. "And he has been trying to arrange so that he can give

Felix other work than desk-work. I did not learn exactly what it would be; but I can see that he is very desirous to help the lad, from friendship to both the Brants and the Winsteads.''

Mr. Lindsay nodded musingly and no more was said just then.

That very evening Guy found his way to Miss Halsey's parlor, and Bertha was surprised to find that a secret fit of the blues had been charmed away for her by his conversation. From that time it became no unusual thing for Guy to stop at Miss Halsey's, and Bertha saw him frequently before the day of Kate's party arrived.

On the evening of the party she went there with Mortimer, with a very unusual feeling of nervousness in her breast. She had not met Mark since the evening of his hasty trip to Harleytown, and she shrank from meeting him or his wife, as she was really half afraid of that extremely unconventional young lady. As for Mark, she imagined that he would feel embarrassed at meeting her.

In fact, Mark had entirely forgotten her appeal to him at the station, and he greeted her with his usual frank and cordial manner.

The color flashed up to Bertha's pale cheeks and she raised her head a little proudly as she exchanged a few commonplace remarks with him, and then turned to his wife. It did not occur to her that her conduct was being closely watched, but, in fact, the reports that had been circulated at the time when she was seen so frequently with Mark and Kate had not been forgotten, and there were several who were curious to know how she would ''take it,'' now that he was married.

Bertha went about among her friends entirely unconscious of all this until it was unpleasantly forced upon her knowledge by a chance remark which she overheard. She was resting in the conservatory, for the crowd and excitement began to weary her, unused as she was to anything of the sort since her illness. Suddenly from behind a large palm that screened her she heard the words :

"Oh, she carries it off very well. But I could see that she flushed up when she spoke to him and the bride ; and of course it must have been hard for her. He really did not treat her right, I think. He was so very attentive. She was constantly here with Kate, and he would walk home from her lessons with her. Indeed, I believe that the *musicales* were gotten up mainly to bring them together. I was not a bit surprised that she left town and was so ill after the marriage came out."

"He was hardly the kind of young man that I supposed she would care about," said another voice.

"Oh, he is very agreeable ; and then you must remember that her family was always poor ; and since these new cousins have turned up they will have less than ever, owing to some provision in Miss Merrivale's will."

Bertha had heard more than she intended or wished ; and now, feeling giddy with shame and indignation, she rose softly to make her escape unperceived by the speakers, whom she recognized by their voices as two young ladies whom she knew slightly.

As she slipped hurriedly and noiselessly toward the entrance to the drawing room, she was too much absorbed to notice that a gentleman was standing among the foliage not far from her. It was Guy Atherton, who had seen her enter the conservatory and had come in search of her. He had also been near enough to hear the words of the two speakers, and he hotly longed to go to them and deny every word. While he was thinking he was startled to see Bertha passing near him, and the suspicion flashed upon him that she might have heard the same words.

"Gossiping cats!" he muttered wrathfully between his teeth, but in the same instant he realized that it would never do to let Bertha imagine that he had been within earshot, so he waited until she was fairly in the drawing room before he ventured to follow her. Then he asked if he might take her into the supper room, and from that time he did not leave her side for more than a few moments.

Bertha had with an effort rallied all her resolution to bear herself bravely through the rest of the evening, and the appearance of Guy and his thoughtful attentions helped her wonderfully. It was therefore hardly strange that she welcomed him a little more graciously than usual; and before the evening was over he had found the opportunity to ask her to be his wife. Poor Bertha, startled and embarrassed, attempted to word her answer as gently as possible; but it was a refusal, and she went home sorely vexed with herself that she should have, as she feared, led him on.

"Why, only last winter I thought that it was Kate," she thought bewildered. "How can he have changed in such a short time? What would Kate think if she knew?"

Meanwhile Guy was wending his way to his lodgings, moody indeed, but by no means in the depressed state that might be considered proper under the circumstances.

"Of course, I knew that she would say no," he muttered. "But after the gossip that she had heard I had to risk it. I only hope that it won't injure my chances; but I'll not give up for one refusal. Why couldn't those silly women hold their tongues?" Thus perturbed but determined he let himself into his lodging house and lighting the gas in his small room he went off into a day-dream broken by occasional indignant exclamations, such as:

"A pack of lies! I wish I had told them so. That fellow indeed! I might have known that she would never look twice at such a man as he was. But why can't people mind their own business? Maybe she will keep me at arm's length now, and I shall not even be able to call there. I don't see any good excuse for going there just now. But I couldn't do otherwise; and at least it will give her something else besides their wretched gossip to get angry over—if she really is angry with me."

Thus it happened that Kate's party, which had delighted Juliet, left two people in a very uncomfortable frame of mind.

But Guy was not the man to remain in moody inaction. Some matters connected with the will took Guy to Merrivale in a few days, and when he returned he bore a message from Mrs. Winstead to her daughter, which gave him an excellent excuse for calling at Miss Halsey's. Most of his conversation was with Mortimer and Miss Clive, but it was plain that Bertha was not displeased to see him. A few days later Bertha found an opportunity to run out home, and before she returned to town she had a long, confidential talk with her mother, in which she told her all about the events of the evening of Kate's party.

"I hope I had not been thoughtless," she said anxiously. "I do not see why he should have got any such idea in his head. I felt so sorry to think that it would spoil all the pleasant evenings that Mortimer and Aunt Rachel enjoyed so much, for I know that they like him. But he really seems to be inclined to keep up his friendship with them, and I don't think there can be any harm in my being polite to him. Do you, mamma?" she inquired.

"No, my child," replied Mrs. Winstead, patting her hand; "just be your natural self, and put the whole of this out of your mind."

"It was so unkind of those girls to talk about me. I feel as though I never wanted to see Mark Willoughby again," said poor Bertha hotly. "It is enough to make one vow never to speak to a young man."

"No, dear, not that; but to make one very careful not to neglect the warnings that one receives from those who love one and can judge better than one's self."

Bertha did not resent the words as she would have done a few weeks before, and she returned to town with a lighter heart.

Mrs. Winstead went about her usual duties with mingled feelings. Guy Atherton had had some conversation with her that had nothing to do with the Merrivale will, and thus she knew part of what Bertha had to tell her before Bertha had opened her lips on the subject. It was a great relief to her, however, to feel that she had her daughter's confidence; and the straightforward, manly conduct of Guy and his evident attachment to Bertha had impressed her favorably. She was also greatly pleased to find that Mr. Brant spoke highly of Guy, and thus, with all her natural shrinking from the thought of letting her daughter go from her own care, she was able to wait with a peaceful heart for the future to unfold itself.

The arrangement was now definitely settled that the Brants were to continue for a year at least to be inmates of the Merrivale homestead together with Mrs. Winstead and her family. Felix had been looking for work, and Mr. Palmer had already made some proposals as to taking him into the employ of Palmer & Davenant. At first Mrs. Brant looked upon this project with decided disapproval; but Mr. Brant, who had come into closer contact with Mr. Palmer, noticed a change in that gentleman's views and standard of life that inclined him to feel a hearty friendship for him and to trust him as he had not done before. Mrs. Brant, as was usually the case, acquiesced in her husband's opinion whenever he took the trouble to form and express an opinion.

As soon as the summer holidays began, Bertha returned to the farmhouse, and by that time Felix was installed in Palmer & Davenant's and had secured a room with Mortimer at Miss Halsey's.

Her two boys, as she called them, kept Aunt Rachel very happily occupied, and both of them gave the little lady the most devoted attention. This was indeed a fortunate thing, for the attentions of Guy Atherton were not quite as unremitting after Bertha went home. He seemed to find his way more frequently to Merrivale and was not as often seen at Miss Halsey's.

The summer was far advanced and Bertha was beginning to think about her winter's work with her pupils before Guy felt that it would be safe to speak again to her of the hopes that lay so carefully cherished in his heart; but this time his patience was rewarded and her answer sent him back to his rather dingy lodgings in such a mood that everything looked rose-colored to him. The very next day he amazed his partner by beginning to make inquiries about small and very comfortable houses. Mrs. Winstead, however, wished that the marriage should be deferred till the spring, and Bertha was glad to have the prospect of a winter at home in which she could help her mother and sisters.

"I can take nearly all Helen's lessons, and Jessica can study with me too," she said; "and then next year Jessica will be nearly seventeen and well able to be a great help to you."

Mrs. Brant was pleased with this arrangement. She was eager to have the time arrive when the matter of the property could be settled beyond risk of change. She had noticed that Felix was looking forward impatiently to the time when he would be of age and could legally renounce all claim to the Merrivale property. But she also shrewdly guessed that there was a more precious piece of Mrs. Win stead's property to which he might in time lay a claim that he would be very unwilling to have disallowed.

It was on a stormy, windy day in March that Felix reached the age of twenty-one, and the Brants, who had been eagerly anticipating the day, would not be deterred by the weather, but presented themselves at Mr. Lindsay's office, where the necessary papers were duly signed and the Merrivale property again became the undisputed possession of Mrs. Winstead and her children.

A few weeks later, on a bright April morning, Bertha Winstead became Bertha Atherton, and the young couple settled in the cozy little house that Guy had prepared in Harriton.

During the bright, warm summer months that followed, Mrs. Winstead frequently had all her family gathered around her in the old farmhouse; but when autumn returned the party dwindled, for Mr. and Mrs. Brant found that he could more easily continue his work in Harriton if they lived among the people in whom he was interested; and also it was decided to send Jack, who was now thirteen, to the Harriton Academy. Mrs. Brant insisted that he must make his home with them, and of course she wanted her own boy Felix. With the family party at Merrivale thus diminished, Mortimer felt that he could easily return home, and thus Miss Clive had to give up both her boys; but the fact that Bertha was so near to her, compensated in a degree, and the little lady had small chance to pass many lonely hours.

It was on a sunny May morning about a year after his marriage, that Guy Atherton entered the office in Cedar Street and found Mr. Lindsay and Mr. Brant in interested conversation.

"A clever dodge," chuckled the little lawyer. "A very clever dodge of Master Felix. He throws over old Miss Jessica Merrivale and her money, and then he turns around and establishes a claim to Miss Jessica Winstead."

"But not her money," put in Mr. Brant smiling; "for we all hope that it will be many, many years before any of that will descend to Mrs. Winstead's children or grandchildren. How is the boy, Atherton?"

"Oh, he is doing finely," replied Guy; "and Bertha is already begging for permission to take him out to the old homestead one of these fine days."

"Mrs. Winstead is the youngest-looking grandmother that I know," remarked Mr. Lindsay. "But she seems to have a fund of placid content that bids defiance to wrinkles. If all families could settle their disputes as cleverly and amiably as you have settled this case of the Merrivale will, my business would be gone."

Mr. Brant smiled in his quiet way as he said:

"Do you think that was all our doing? None of us were quite equal to that. If you were to ask Mrs. Winstead she would tell you who settled that so happily."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Lindsay with some curiosity.

Mr. Brant's pale and intellectual face seemed to shine with a light from within as he quoted the words:

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy paths."

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